The beat of your heart

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/47667406.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Matthew Brown/Will Graham
Characters:	Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Will Graham, Will Graham's Dogs, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Dr. Frederick Chilton
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort, Falling In Love, Worship, Humor, Fluff, Canon-Typical Violence, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Consent, Trust Issues, Touch-Starved, Heartbeat Kink, Childhood Trauma, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Nightmares, Blow Jobs, Anal Sex, Service Top, Matthew Brown is obsessed with Will Graham, Hannibal is jealous, Manipulative Hannibal Lecter, Matthew Brown is a simp, he loves will so much it hurts, Matthew Brown is like one of Will's dog in a way lol, One-Sided Hannibal Lecter/Will Graham, im so sorry guys
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-05 Completed: 2023-07-02 Words: 87,877 Chapters: 22/22

The beat of your heart

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Summary

After his attempt to kill Hannibal Lecter, Matthew survives and ends up in the hospital for the criminally insane. When it is time for him to leave its walls, he goes where his heart takes him - to Will Graham's doorstep, to his personal God's house. Matthew has trust issues and a terrible tactile hunger. Will has psychological trauma after everything that happened between him and Hannibal. This is a story about the importance of acceptance, unbelievable love and the dark ghosts of the past. Or maybe the ghosts of the future.

Notes

I'm not sure about the ending yet, but I already have several chapters written, so updates should be more or less regular, heh. and a word of warning: english is not my first language, so there may be mistakes and strange wording. anyway, I hope you enjoy it!
oh, and yes - the main ship is Matthew/Will, but Hannibal loves Will (in his own way), and Will as well has something in his heart. Something.

Chapter 1

Betrayal. Will tilted his head back slightly and slowly closed his eyes, sinking into himself. The sunlight falls softly on his face, tangling in his brown curls and lighting up his long eyelashes. Graham finds himself in a safe place, where the rivers' murmuring pleasantly washes away all bad thoughts, allowing him to melt away in the peace and quiet of his own mind. But the dark thoughts no longer leave him completely, even in such moments of pure happiness, they hide in the shadows cast by the tall trees surrounding the river, taking the form of a wendigo in the shape of which the features of an old friend were easily seen. An old friend, about whom Will had been so badly wrong this whole time that now he was just deeply ashamed of himself. He was so blind.

He wasn't faking those tears, not really: oh, he'd been incredibly eager to sob ever since he'd found the ear in his sink, and that desire only increased gradually with each new piece of information surfacing from the depths of his mind. Betrayal was the only thing that seemed real to him. He trusted Hannibal, he believed him, he saw in him his anchor that kept the ship from leaving the shore, but in reality the man turned out to be a weight that would typically be chained to the leg of a drowned man. Under such circumstances it was not difficult to squeeze out tears in order to provoke the necessary emotions and thoughts in others. It was actually much harder to *stop crying* after this.

In the hospital he felt as if he were a bug under a microscope, and that was not far from the truth. Panopticon in its best form, Chilton had to be given credit for that. Eavesdropping devices, ready to greedily absorb any word from him or his visitors; cameras that, by their mere existence, gave Will a nervous itch. At times they pissed him off to the point where he was practically torn up inside by the desire to see how soon Chilton and the orderlies would come running in if he started tearing at his own skin on his wrists with his fingernails or his teeth.

The orderlies were... all kinds. Most behaved as aloof as possible and with weary caution. Will didn't even bother to study them, and they didn't seem to pique his interest or even the slightest curiosity: they seemed like a mere crowd, with only a few simple lines in the script: "turn around," "hands against the wall," "step away from the bars," and so on. Will didn't distinguish their voices or faces, looking always somewhere around their chests where their nametags hung. He knew only their names and already understood if he should relax and turn away when he saw one, returning to his stream fantasies or, on other occasions, look up and meet their eyes to see the mood of his guard - but no more than that. And not that Graham was beaten or humiliated in any way, no - he was under the special supervision and attention of Dr Chilton, which meant that without his connivance there was little they could do to him. Will suspected that he would not be touched until the trial was over. But what would happen next was still kind of hard to predict.

However, no matter what the future held in store for him, there was only one person to blame - Hannibal Lecter. Every time, even when he only mentally uttered his name, Will wanted to wince at the bitter taste on his tongue and the annoying dull ache in his solar plexus. *He trusted him so much.* Like a puppy, was beside him so pathetic, shivering, as if he hoped

Lecter would pick him up off the street, as he himself had more than once picked up poor strays from the roadside. It appeared that Hannibal, seeing an injured animal, approached, but not to help, rather to pick it up and conduct experiments on the poor creature. Cut it off one piece at a time and devour it until he swallows it whole. Will has an image before his eyes of Lecter bringing a perfectly square-cut piece of roasted meat to his mouth and swallowing as he chews, his Adam's apple twitching slightly, and then Graham's gaze stops on his dark eyes, which belong not to a man, no - to a monster. Wendigo.

The image of the wendigo made him wonder about Hannibal's past. Could the hunger and cold that he had been surrounded by years ago, when he was just a child, have made him like this? Will shudders with his whole body, squinting as if trying to shake off these thoughts and his empathy, like a small insect or a sticky cobweb. He sighed heavily, lowering his head and rubbing his face with his calloused palms before opening his eyes, finding himself back where he'd left off before - in a spacious hall in a narrow cage. There was no one in front of him - there seemed to be no more visitors for the day. However, at the same time he was not about to be led into his cage yet. There must have been some sort of cleaning, perhaps Chilton still hoped to find a blade hidden in the mattress, or a confession of insanity scrawled on the wall.

"Would you like a book, Mr. Graham?" asks him the orderly, whose presence Will had already forgotten, having become too self-absorbed.

Graham opens his mouth, raising his gaze, but he does not even intend to look in the direction of the man. "I have my imagination" he answers him as politely as he can.

And then this attendant - Matthew Brown, a young man with a slight, and perhaps false, lisp, a mischievous smile and twinkling eyes - confesses to him that he is his admirer. A fan. For the sake of talking to whom he found himself willing to give an interview to this damned Freddie Lounds. Will focused all his attention on the man, keeping his gaze on him as he slowly approached the cage, in turn also keeping his gaze on him. He allows himself to open the door of his mind slightly, letting the waves of empathy come over him, careful not to drown and suffocate in the other man's madness. But Matthew... isn't insane. At least not in the way that most of the serial killers Graham had gotten inside the heads of before were. But he isn't normal either. He is just... different. Just like he'd told Freddie back then.

Will stared at him and listened to his flowing, honey-like voice, diluted with a slight hoarseness, as if trying to mentally assemble a rubik's cube. He considered quickly all possible versions of who is standing in front of him, carefully answering his words, feeling slightly relieved that no one is eavesdropping on them now. And then he looked up at him, stepping out of the cage he had unlocked, and saw his gaze and his mouth covered by the palm of his hand. The gears in Graham's head spun with renewed vigour and he saw the first piece of the puzzle, put together one side of the cube: Mr. Brown really is his heartfelt fan, his adorer, he looks at him like a young man in love at the prettiest girl in school. It occurs to him, that if he listens closely enough, he can hear a squeak involuntarily bursting out of Matthew's chest. Or perhaps it is just another illusion, Will can’t say for sure. He only realizes with certainty that Brown is incredibly happy to finally be able to talk to him, and is also feeling a pleasant delight to see him relatively free - uncuffed and coming out peacefully from behind bars.

"Have you seen the way that smaller birds will mob a hawk on a wire?" Matthew asks. "You and me, we are hawks, Mr. Graham," he remarks.

"Hawks are solitary" Graham replies without hesitation.

"And that's their weakness" Brown parries, and Will blinks, still not turning to him, waiting for his further words or actions. He hears barely audible footsteps, realizing that he is next to a predator, cautious, graceful as a cat. "Enough of those smaller birds get together and they chase hawks away" the voice is slightly louder than a whisper, and then there is a slight clang of handcuffs, and Will obediently, already almost reflexively, moves his hands behind him. "Imagine if the hawks started working together," the man utters, snapping the handcuffs around his wrists, lingering his hand suddenly on one of those as if... Graham frowns. Is he… *probing his pulse?*

It feels absurd. If Matthew were crazier than he was, Will might have assumed that the man was checking to see if he was real - something of the sort of illness that Georgia Madchen's affliction belonged to. But Brown isn't insane. So he is...

Will turns his head slightly, still feeling a bit puzzled, even as Brown's fingers stop circling his wrist in search of a pulse. He meets the man's eyes and feels faint echoes of his emotions, like a needle glinting in the sun in a haystack. "Teamwork is hard when you can't trust anyone," Will remarks, and Matthew smoothly tilts his head slightly sideways for a couple of moments, then just as calmly returns it to its previous position, listening to Graham's words, waiting for him to continue. "You always have to be on your guard. Learning to recognize lies. Watching the pupils. Observing facial expressions and gestures. Listening to the heartbeat…"

Brown almost inaudibly exhales, lifting his head slightly, looking up at him with the admiration of a believer who has heard the speech right from his god’s lips. "Rumor has it that you too have been betrayed," he finally says, tilting his head forward, never for a moment stopping to look into Graham's bright eyes. He slides his fingers smoothly to his wrist, a little bolder this time. "If this is true..."

"Then I'm not a killer," Will says, letting himself wince for a moment. "And then you're in awe of the wrong man, Mr. Brown."

Matthew smirks with the same mischievousness. "Oh, I know who I worship, Mr. Graham, don't worry about it," he licks his lips, lowering his gaze for a moment, only to turn it back to Will's eyes afterwards. "If you really have been betrayed, I can't help but feel nothing but contempt for that man. How else should one treat this Judas who betrayed Christ?"

"Judas has lost faith in Christ," Graham replies simply.

It really seems to him that Hannibal imprisoned him not out of a sense of self-preservation, not to remove his piece from the chessboard, but because he had lost faith that he could mold something worthwhile out of him. It hurts. Will lowered his gaze, swallowing, and felt the double interest of Matthew's inquisitive eyes on him.

The man darted a glance in the direction of the clock and sighed with some displeasure, taking Graham by the elbow and leading him towards the exit to take him to his cell.

As he passed the guards and wandered down the long corridor with Will, he allowed himself a smirk as he looked at Graham walking beside him. He leaned almost imperceptibly closer to him, too overwhelmed with happiness to continue being cautious and silent. "Unto thee we own our debt; here thou hast left a way that breathed words may enter loving ears" he stops near the right cell, and Will allows himself to look at him.

Graham recognizes the lines about Pyramus and Thisbe's love. He recalls the story and the way it ended, as if hoping to see beneath the double meanings a secret message that might allow him to decipher his admirer's mind and intentions. It seems that the two lovers arranged to meet by the stream, but found themselves trapped in a Shakespearean play: Thisbe, arriving first, saw the lioness with a blood-stained mouth and was frightened, running away and dropping her cloak, while Pyramus, coming next, saw his lover's blood-stained clothes and in a fit of desperation stabbed himself with his sword, staining the mulberries scarlet with his blood. When Thisbe returned and saw Pyramus, she plunged the sword into her heart and united with her beloved in the realm of the dead.

Will couldn't understand what Matthew wanted to convey to him beyond the obvious and then mentally berated himself. After his interactions with Hannibal, he'd made a habit of diving too deeply into any metaphor, and he'd completely forgotten that not all people said so much more than the average person could understand. Of course, Brown couldn't be called superficial or stupid, but he didn't enjoy deep dives of five-layered meanings the way Hannibal did. *Shit.* There he is again. Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal.

Get out of my head.

Brown gestures for the guards to open the door and then turns away. "I'm extremely pleased that you wanted to talk to me. Your perceptiveness has almost made my ears blush, Mr. Graham. But why did you need this conversation?" he is curious and closes the door, only to reach his palms through the bars and take Will by the wrist, undoing the handcuffs.

"I need a favor," Will says softly.

"I'm always happy to do a favor for a friend" Brown replies quietly, leaning a little closer to the cage separating them. "Just say the words" he purrs.

Will slowly turns to him, still feeling his hand on his wrist, counting the beats of his heart. His eyes, sparkling with loyalty, as if he were some kind of a dog, gaze into Graham's bright ones, studying him as he bargains with himself, with his inner demons, while his heart speeds up its beating faster and faster with each second, as if before a parachute jump.

"I want you to kill Hannibal Lecter" - *he jumps.*

Matthew holds back a delighted breath, feeling his own heart pounding madly in his chest with such a vivid amorousness that he had never before experienced in his life and never thought he was capable of experiencing. His God had asked him to kill for him.

As he walks away, Brown smirks slightly, thinking to himself what a fool Hannibal Lecter is to betray a God.

The bullet hitting his shoulder feels like an arrow fired from the bow of an adversary trying to prevent justice from being done. Along with the flash of pain, Matthew also recalls with a sudden glimpse how he had read in the report that Jack had also shot Will in the shoulder when he was about to kill Hannibal. This thought makes him smirk contentedly, and he tilts his head slightly as he looks at Lecter balancing on the bucket and, gaining his strength, kicks it abruptly, listening with pleasure as the man begins to choke in a noose.

Closing his eyes, he sees Will in front of him and hears his heartbeat slowing in relief.

Chapter 2

Matthew Brown had survived, and he was also clever enough to pretend to be insane - after all, the years he'd spent in the hospital had their perks, and he knew perfectly well how to behave as a killer, who acted not entirely of his own *free will* but rather at the wave of their fevered mind's magic wand.

By the time he found himself in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Will Graham was already a free man. This thought gave Matthew special pleasure, especially in view of the fact that he had failed to kill Hannibal Lecter; it seemed to him now that it was even kind of for the best - not only had the Ripper gotten him out of jail by getting the FBI to drop all charges, but he also now had the opportunity to die at Will's own hands. It seemed to Brown only a matter of time - sooner or later Graham's heart would stop racing at the mere idea of killing Hannibal, and then, to the sound of a peaceful metronome, he would stab him, or snap his neck, or strangle him, maybe even shoot him - Brown had never paid much attention to the method of killing itself, caring far more about the fact itself and, for aesthetic reasons, what was then done with the body. And he did not yet know Graham's personal views on the matter.

He had only killed once - for Will's sake - and he was going to kill a second time just for him. He had been his inspiration, had been the one who had given him, deaf, blind and mute, the ability to hear and see and speak. All he regretted now was that he no longer had the chance to touch him. Graham was far away, looking at him from the pages of the newspapers, 'The Man Who Did Not Kill All Those People', followed by old courtroom photographs, as if Christ had lingered under investigation awaiting an unjust verdict. His body, his all-seeing eyes and his heart were far beyond the walls of the building in which Brown found himself locked up. And that was, in a way, even a good thing.

Matthew hadn't hoped to see him in person again, having soon decided that he had been forgotten as one of thousands of others, and that was almost painful, though expected - loving Will was after all the same as loving the moon. How could a mere meteorite hope for reciprocity?

However, contrary to his expectations, one Wednesday afternoon, at three o'clock, the orderlies took him to talk to a visitor in a private room, and right at that moment Brown realized that there could only be two people - either Hannibal or Will. Both options were incredibly exciting, so he bit his lips, eagerly awaiting the fascinating conversation. And, oh, he was not disappointed.

When Graham entered the room, Brown heard his own heartbeat in his ears, holding his breath. He was gripped by a feeling akin to that which envelops the body and mind when one has just woken up from a nightmare - a storm of emotion so overwhelming in its intensity that it is both shocking and disconcerting. Will was different now - if before he had been a chained Greek god mocked by mortals, now he seemed like a majestic, calm, prideful deity, willingly descending into hell only to see an old friend and perhaps receive some kind of favor from him. His curls had become neater, as had his stubble, and he wore dark jeans and

a shirt of good cloth instead of a prison jumpsuit. Seeing him like this, Matthew didn't hold back, leaning forward a little, clinking the chain of his handcuffs, as if wanting to absorb his image in the smallest detail. Brown had never been able to draw, and from the moment he met William it had been his greatest regret. The only art through which he could in theory express his ardent feelings was to paint with the blood of victims murdered in the name of his god - and that, unfortunately, did not seem particularly possible to him any time soon.

"Mr Graham..." Brown says in an admiring whisper, watching as the man sits down opposite him. "I'm flattered," he smiles, not even willing to blink, so he doesn't miss a second of the spectacular sight before his inquisitive gaze.

Will rewarded him with a smile bordering on forced politeness, but Matthew wasn't offended by that - he was perfectly aware of his God's peculiarities and had nothing against it. In fact, he was even pleased that he tried to smile. "Hello, Matthew," Graham exhales in a truly soft, albeit strained, way as he places his hands tentatively on the table and runs his gaze over the figure of the patient-prisoner-orderly, stopping at his fingers.

The silence lingers, and Brown could have kept it quiet, just enjoying the wonderful picture before his eyes, but curiosity still burns his inquisitive mind from within, threatening to burn a hole in his brain. "Mr. Graham," he calls out, and Will looks up, wondering.

When he calls Hannibal so formally, he tries to distance himself from him, but when Matthew calls him so, he doesn't try to pull away - instead, he's like a wayfarer reaching for the last glass of water in the desert, or rather like a dying sinner who has believed in God and tries to gently and with utmost respect reach out to him, not thinking himself worthy enough to speak to him, and yet dares to do it. When Hannibal calls Will by name he tries to erase the line Graham has drawn, but when Will calls Brown by name he feels as if he is trying to show leniency to a wounded, dying dog on the side of the road, giving him at least a few moments of peace and quiet.

"Mr. Graham, it's no doubt a great pleasure to see you before my eyes, and a great honour, but I'm not quite sure why you've condescended to me" Brown remarks cautiously, tilting his head slightly to the side and then smirking a bit with a noticeable degree of irony. "I don't think I could do you another friendly favor, being in such... constraining circumstances" he moves his hands a little to jingle his chain and props his chin with his hand, leaving the other resting on the table.

Will smiles faintly this time, but quite genuinely. "I saw a red mulberry in the woods a couple of days ago," he says, and Brown's eyes light up with delight - the thought of the legend takes him back to a pleasant past when he was so close to his god that he dared to drop a hint of his crush on him. "I remembered you and how our first and last conversation ended, and realized it would have been good of me to at least come and... thank you," he exhales, lowering his gaze.

"I didn't do anything. Tried but failed" Matthew remarks, then suddenly tilts his head to the side, resting his cheek against his palm. "I heard they arrested Dr. Chilton and declared him the Ripper. And Dr. Lecter is still out there" he puts a question into that phrase, not directly voiced by him, knowing that Will would understand the hint without difficulty.

"Things have gotten a bit more complicated," Graham exhales, and Brown senses that's not what the man wanted to talk with him about.

He purses his lips, placing both hands on the table, and is somewhat tentatively silent for a few moments, and then cautiously extends his hand towards Will - just a few inches, opening his palm in a mute hint. Graham looks at this somewhat hesitantly, and at the moment when Brown is already about to withdraw his hand back, the man makes up his mind after all and places his hand next to his, consenting to the touch.

Matthew's eyes light up like Winston's when Will, coming home after work, scratches him behind the ear. The parallel seems sweet and heart-warming, and Graham feels nothing wrong when the man finally touches him, counting his heartbeat. Brown looks at this as if the places where he touches his deity are one of the divine miracles. "Nothing is really complicated when you don't have to lie. Lie is very energy-consuming and messy. Truth is simple and elegant. You don't need to lie to me, Mr. Graham," Matthew's lips touch a smile.

Will swallows, looking at his eyes, but at the same time as if past them, into the void, realizing that the truth is indeed very simple to formulate, but nevertheless difficult to pronounce. Almost painful. "Dr. Lecter has decided he's in the mood to hunt with another hawk," he replies, choosing an angle of truth that is easier to vocalize - not his own attitude to what's going on, but the one coming from Hannibal's side. "He's certainly not doing it for safety reasons, in his case it's... just a pure curiosity."

“Is it?” Matthew looks at him intently. "Dr. Lecter is very foolish if he decided to let someone he once betrayed get so close to him. It would be reasonable to expect that you only want revenge, make him feel the same pain that he made you feel," he tilts his head sideways. "Or he wants you to betray him. Suicide at the hands of others, remorse for his sins?"

Will shakes his head. "Dr. Lecter is not remorseful. He doesn't think he betrayed me. He sees it as helping me to... become. A caterpillar cannot become a butterfly unless it is confined within the walls of a tight cocoon" he notes, and Brown nods, understanding. Graham licks his lips and moves subtly closer, looking at the man in return. "I wasn't thanking you for trying to kill him. I thanked you for believing me that I didn't kill all those people, for believing in my words about Hannibal," he swallows, averting his gaze. "And for not betraying my trust. You didn't even confess in court that it was me who talked you into killing Lecter - and I'm sure you were asked a lot about that."

"My imagination is pretty good, but even within it I couldn't really picture betraying you, Mr. Graham" says Matthew heartily.

Graham nods, licking his lips. "I would like to thank you. In the way I can" he finally says and extends his other hand in his direction, forcing himself to look him in the eye. "By understanding," Will says, putting his own fingers on Brown's wrist. *"I see you, Matthew."*

The man lowers his gaze to his wrist for a moment and then looks at Graham with an adoration that is close to despair. "What do you see?" he asks on the verge of a whisper. As if he knows that in a few moments he will be blinded by the painfully bright light of a god, but he continues to stare anyway, ready to lose his sight just to get a single glimpse of the grace

that belongs to the most beautiful deity in the world, who has chosen him, of all the pathetic demons and humans, to be the one who deserved a right to see his god-made miracles.

Will frowns slightly, as if seeking to see something through a snowstorm on a dark night. Then he licks his lips and looks away for a few moments, as if choosing his words carefully, not wanting to offend the man in front of him. Matthew responds by squeezing his wrist slightly, as if seeking to convey to him that lying is harder than telling the truth.

Graham nods softly, looking him in the eye again. "I see a small kid who has been very cruelly deceived. Who has been lied to right to his face. And then... he was left alone. He was promised not to be abandoned, but he was abandoned anyway. And he was very hurt and very lonely. At first he tried to fit in, putting on a mask just to please those around him, thinking that he had been abandoned because he wasn't good enough, and if he tried and behaved the way others wanted him to, this horror wouldn't happen again. But then he realized that no matter how good he was, people were still lying to him. It wasn't him who stomped loudly, it was someone else's floor creaking" Will bites his lip, feeling Matthew's heartbeat, vividly imagining the little boy before him, the teenager who is laughed at and not taken seriously by his peers and disliked by adults, as if they felt intuitively that he was different. "And everyone still sees that there's something wrong with him. Even with greasepaint on his face and his skin, he's still different to them. He realized pretty early that he either had to be invisible and stay away from anyone, gradually melting away like an ice cube thrown into a glass, or he could take his distinctiveness to an insane degree and soon be burnt to a crisp. But in both cases, he thinks he is doomed to be alone. Because no one is capable of understanding him. And he is incapable of trusting anyone" Will says all this, unable not to empathize with him, and tears even appear in the corners of his eyes from the almost physical pain of the feelings he evokes in Brown with his words. "The expectation of deception from everyone around and the desperate desire to be understood. What exactly has happened to you, Matthew? Who left you?" he asks with pain in his voice.

The man looks at him as if he were the most beautiful creature in the universe, as if Will had just taken his heart out of his chest and shoved it into his own, sharing all the pain that had been lurking in him all this time, tormenting him, and thus making it more understandable, more bearable. "When my mother left my father and me, it was fine. She and I were never close. But then... my father put me in the car and promised he would take care of me. He probably didn't see it as a lie, but it was; if I'd known where to look, I'd have figured it out by the racing heartbeat and how nervous he looked then. But I was ten and I didn't know any of that stuff yet. I miraculously managed to survive when he deliberately drove off the road and hit a tree. I crawled up to him and tried to feel for a pulse and felt the last couple of beats of his lying heart" he lowers his gaze, recalling all these events hidden behind a screen in his mind till that day. "Then there was the orphanage. My mother came to see me, promising to take me away... she promised me that every time, and she never did. She didn't understand that it would have been better if she hadn't come to see me at all... I don't even know why she said she would take me home, knowing that she wouldn't. I guess she wanted me to have hope. But false hope is worse than the ugly truth" he wrinkles his nose for just a second, as if he hasn't managed to contain the unpleasant emotion.

"Yes," Will agrees, exhaling. The false hope of friendship Hannibal once gave him was worse than if he had truthfully and sincerely tried to kill him immediately after encountering Hobbs.

Will prefers not to ponder whether the hope was indeed false, especially considering how just yesterday he and Hannibal were joking about killing Freddie Lounds and drinking wine in his living room by the fireplace.

"You're giving Lecter false hope now, aren't you?" Matthew asks gently, bringing Graham back to reality, and the man seems immediately struck with a chill. He frowns and straightens up, but doesn't remove his hands, letting his heartbeat betray him. "It's cruel, but he deserves it," Brown shrugs phlegmatically. "There's nothing wrong with giving a traitor the same poison he once poisoned you with."

"Even-Steven," Will says quietly, looking below the man's eyes, and he nods.

Matthew watches him, the way dogs usually do, trying to guess what's wrong with their master and what's on his mind. "He brings up so many conflicting emotions that it becomes difficult to say whether you really want him dead or not, whether you want revenge or not. So many... you don't really know what you want, do you?" he tilts his head sideways.

Will licks his lips and smiles with his usual nervous, tense smile. "God forbid I understand my feelings about Hannibal Lecter," he jokes, and Brown mirrors his grin. Graham lowers his gaze, looking thoughtfully at Matthew's hands. "Do you think it would have been better if I'd just killed him?"

"For you, for me or for him?" the man asks and shakes his head with a smile as Will looks at him again. "Mr. Graham, it's naive to assume that your story with him will end in anything other than the death of one or both of you. The only question is how much more will happen before then and who will be the first to pick up the knife."

Will nods slowly, frowning, tensely immersed in his own thoughts for a few more long moments. His pulse gradually calms, as if he's mentally coming to some sort of decision, and then he exhales slowly, smiling weakly, leaning back in his chair; he stops counting Matthew's heartbeat, but he doesn't take his hand away from him. Empathy. "How are you doing here? I know it can be hard in this place sometimes. The caged hawk beats its wings painfully against the bars..."

Brown smiles slowly, keeping his gaze on him, and then snorts, shrugging his shoulders. He no longer probes the man's pulse, instead tracing intricate shapes and words on his pale skin with his fingertips. "The orderlies here are no good. Everyone knows I know the tricks, so they treat me very warily and sometimes too roughly. It's as if they're trying to punish me beforehand. For a thoughtcrime or something, it's creepy and depressing. If only I could learn your imagination trick, but I'm too impatient and hyperactive for anything like that. The mind palace seems to require patience and assiduity. I've been having trouble with that lately, I don't even know why," he chattered, and Will listened - really listened. He wasn't really being listened to much himself at the time, and he didn't want for Matthew to be tormented like he was. "Do you know why?"

"I have a couple of theories," Graham remarks in a calmly soft tone. "When my dogs don't go outside for a long time because of quarantine or something, it becomes harder for them to focus and follow commands as well. Discipline starts to limp, they become impatient about everything" he smiles a little, and it's genuine because he's talking about his dogs. "A hawk is

used to flying free among the trees. Put him in a cage and he soon gets nervous, and that doesn't really encourage concentration. That was easier for me than for you in that respect," he admits.

"Interesting. What's the other theory?" Matthew asks curiously.

Will sighs, realizing that his second thought might be far more personal and painful than the first, but he can't lie to Brown - it wouldn't be fair. "Perhaps it's because of me. You felt in me the possibility of friendship, of understanding, of acceptance. For someone like you, it's like catnip. But I didn't give you any certainty, and that made the thoughts in your head get tangled up like a snake pit. Under such circumstances, concentrating on something else... is difficult."

Matthew doesn't try to defend himself, he just smiles softly at him, looking as if he were a bright boy in love now; one wouldn't even tell that his hands are covered in blood. However, he was driven to murder for a utilitarian purpose: to rescue his prince from the tower in which the evil dragon had trapped him. Of course he had had it in him before, this willingness to kill, this understanding of cruelty and a nihilistic attitude to morality. But he held back until he saw murder as an opportunity to reach out to his god, the object of his adoration. Will didn't feel guilty about it, but he was aware of this causal connection. "Are you here to give me some certainty?"

"Certainty is something I can't give even to myself. But I can help you build the foundation for your memory palace," Will offers, and Brown nods vigorously, looking at him like a knowledge-hungry student; it seems that if he had the chance, he would have pulled out a notebook and pen now, beginning to take notes on his mentor's words. Graham couldn't help a very faint, almost imperceptible smile - almost, because Matthew, who had been trained since childhood to watch the tiniest facial expression, couldn't help but notice it and smile back, but wider and brighter.

Soon the time of their meeting came to an end, and Will stood up from the table as the signal passed, his heart squeezing slightly painfully as he saw Brown reach out with his hand to follow Graham's slipping wrist. The movement, though, embarrassed Matthew, and he blushed by the tips of his ears, lowering his gaze slightly in confusion, but not for long - the desire to see Graham off with a look was far more intense than any kind of shame.

Will gave him a slightly reassuring, sympathetic smile.

"Should I hope you visit me again?" Brown asks cautiously, as if not wanting to appear too compulsive mortal, and a lisping note slides into his voice, and it is hard to tell whether he used it deliberately to look more pathetic and elicit sympathy, or whether it was something unconscious like a protective body reaction.

Graham lowers his gaze for a few moments and then looks at the man without a smile. "Not while he's alive and out there," he replies. "Hannibal doesn't want me to have anything in my life other than him" his smile is more like a pained grimace.

"Are you worried about me, Mr. Graham?" Matthew smirks a little smugly. "Careful: I might think I have a chance to be kissed by the sun. As soon as the moon will be gone, of course…"

Will smiles back at him slightly, a dark warmth splashing in his eyes. "Goodbye, Matthew," he utters, and then walks out the door, leaving Brown alone.

Chapter 3

It wasn't that Will gave him any clear instructions on how, with his eyes closed, to get to his safe place far from the cage, no. But he did provide him with the essentials: helping him to focus and find an anchor with which to ground himself and dive in. Mr Graham told him that his memory palace was the stream of the river, and that Matthew could choose any place where he felt comfortable. Brown then replied to him, after thinking about it a bit, that for him it was a meadow in the mountains, to which he had once run away from an orphanage when he was fifteen. He'd asked to go camping with others, blatantly lying to everyone's eyes, and then ran off through the woods up the hills at the first opportunity, until he settled with his backpack in an open area where there was not a soul around, only wind, hawks and freedom. He spent nearly twenty-four hours there until he was found and told off, being pulled by his ear by an angry teacher. As they led him away, he managed to cast one last glance at the meadow, as if in an attempt to save that image in his memory.

Then Will suggested him to close his eyes and try to remember that place in detail, imagining himself sitting there, among the tall green grass and with a view of the cliffs. Matthew reluctantly closed his eyes as he did not want to lose sight of the image of the beautiful god before him, but he comforted himself by the fact that he could still hear his voice. It was he who guided Brown to his world of tranquility, and it even seemed to him that if he strained his imagination a little and focused enough, he could see before him, among the greenery and flowers, the figure of his god. He hadn't succeeded then, but after a while he was finally able to give himself that pleasure, and Graham appeared before him, sitting by the campfire, with his curls fluttering in the wind, with a slight stubble and an expression of calm serenity on his face. Matthew watched him for a long while from a distance, and then made up his mind and sat down beside him, allowing himself to relax and exhale.

Occasionally he would say something to him, but Will remained as silent as a statue made of the softest marble. Brown wanted to touch him, but he didn't dare defile him with his palms without permission, it felt violent, blasphemous. Sometimes he concentrated harder and it was as if he could feel his heartbeat beneath his fingers, hear it echoing in his ears.

It went on for... a long time. He followed what was happening outside the prison, still hoping to hear of Graham's victory over his dragon, but it never happened, for months on end. Fortunately, there had been no news of Will's death either, and that gave Matthew a kind of hope. The thought that he would ever see Graham again felt like sweet caramel rolling over his tongue, it soothed and gave comfort even on those evenings when some of the orderlies allowed themselves to be too harsh with so-called preventative measures. It made his unfreedom less unbearable.

And then he happened to get a paper from the TattleCrime written by Freddie Lounds, which was suddenly alive, and in it was a picture of Will - from the hospital - and lots of words about Hannibal and what he did. Brown, after reading the same lines for the fifth time, felt like a window pane vibrating under some crazy tension during an explosion. It was akin to an emotional rollercoaster, and thoughts changed one after the other maddeningly quickly. *Everyone knows about Hannibal, everyone has finally realized that Will was right!* - pleasant,

makes him smile. *Dr. Lecter almost killed Mr. Graham, stabbed him, killed Abigail - and Will seemed to care about her.* - It makes him bite his lip in displeasure. *Will is alive and on the mend!* - And Matthew exhales, calming his inner anger, only to feel the bitterness of irritation the next moment - because *the Ripper has escaped and is still alive.*

Brown had been so unstable that night that he had dared to insult the orderlies, and that had been his mistake - his nose would surely be scarred, and he was lucky the blow wasn't too bad, he might well have begun to have real diction problems. He did not make the same mistake again and was a good boy, desperately good at playing the lunatic, on the mend and madly remorseful of what he had done.

Nearly a year had passed when news of Will and Hannibal suddenly visited him again, and this time it came over him in a warm wave, because... *Mr. Graham had won.* God knows how, but he managed to get Lecter to turn himself in to the police and he was already on trial, at which he confessed to killing the judge, whose corpse was actually assumed to be on Brown before that. His retrial also began because of this, his sentence was reviewed, and he played the self-aware goody-goody as convincingly as ever - and after another year or so he was informed that he was well and there was no longer any reason to keep him behind bars in the BSHCI. Walking out of his cell, he wondered if Will had felt the same way when they decided to release him. That thought made him a little sad - after all, the man had (kinda) promised to visit him as soon as Hannibal was no longer free, but he hadn't done so in a whole year. Brown didn't blame him for that, no, but he was... worried. Could something have happened in that time that made Will forget his promise...? Or maybe he'd just stopped being interesting to his god? Either option made Matthew nervous, and he realized that he desperately needed certainty.

As Will drives his car up to the house on a snowy, frosty evening, he freezes, unable to believe his eyes, looking out at the porch. There, on the steps, sat a frozen Matthew Brown, hugging his knees, dressed in completely inappropriate for this cold time clothing - a white T-shirt, a jacket and the same color trousers. The cold made the tips of his ears red, as did his nose, which had a small scar on it. Next to him there was a bottle of whisky and some kind of container, and so far Graham couldn't tell what might be in there. He only hoped with the edge of his mind that it wasn't human meat.

He slams the door of his car shut and slowly, cautiously steps closer to Matthew, as he always approached the stray dogs he picked up from the roadside. The man reacted to him not immediately, as if immersed very deeply in his own thoughts, finding himself, though with his eyes open, but still somewhere else, inside himself. His body was a little tense, and his knuckles were almost painfully red from the freezing wind. Will shivered from the cold, though he himself was dressed warmly.

Brown finally comes to his senses and, noticing Will beside him, immediately flinches and rises abruptly to his feet, looking at Graham like a happy dog that, after a very long separation, has suddenly seen his owner. For a moment the profiler even thought he was about to start running circles around him and trying to jump into his arms to lick his face. But

to his credit, Matthew appears to be less ardent in his displays of affection. He just looks at William and a smile of pure, genuine happiness begins to spread across his face, and Graham can't help but smile back at him a little, but he immediately pulls himself back, somewhat cautiously taking a half step away.

"Matthew... did you escape?" he clarifies not entirely confidently.

Brown shakes his head with a smile, shoving his hands into his pockets to keep them at least a little warmer. "I've been discharged. I'm mentally well, officially," he explains, and Will exhales, averting his gaze, feeling a mixture of irony and relief. At the same time it makes him skeptical - how could he pull this off? Given the brutality of that poor bailiff's murder, it seemed like nonsense. And yet, here he is, standing in front of him, and he doesn't seem to be lying.

Graham looks again at the man in front of him and, before giving it any serious thought, still lets his empathy decide. He walks past Brown to the door and opens it with the key, hearing his pack of dogs barking from inside the house. Matthew stands beside him a little unsure, picking up a bottle and container from the ground. His red fingers look almost painful, and Will sighs, swinging the door open. Several dogs immediately run out to meet him, but upon spotting the stranger, they start barking and warily circle around him. Graham clicked his tongue and they calmed down, turning their undivided attention back to their master; so did a nervous Brown, and Will couldn't shake the thought that he had just picked up another stray off the street.

Not allowing himself to think about it too much, he nodded and urged him to follow him to his place. There he silently puts the bag of groceries he bought on the table and then walks over to the fireplace, putting logs in and lighting it. Matthew stands nearby in the meantime, looking at the interior and each of the seven dogs. He puts his whisky and container next to the bag, opening it, and Graham, having finished with the fireplace and risen to his feet, looks inside, seeing the scarlet mulberries there.

"Perhaps I should have got something for your dogs" Brown remarks with a smile, walking closer to the fireplace and stretching his arms towards it for a little warmth. He looks up at Will. "That would give me more chances, wouldn't it?"

Graham shakes his head slowly. "I prefer to control exactly what my dogs eat" he says. "After some circumstance…" Will takes one of the berries, tasting it. It turns out pleasantly sweet.

Matthew seems to hold his breath for a moment as he looks at this picture, then steps away from the fireplace, clearly placing his comfort lower in importance than being near God. "I was released early this morning. I really wanted to see you, so I came here without even thinking much about the fact that it might seem excessive. I was too brazen, wasn't I?" Brown asks, looking into his face but not daring to touch his wrists. This desire tears him from the inside out, he feels like a terribly hungry lion right in front of a plate of red meat, from which he is separated by a bloody cage of good manners and respect. His fingertips tingle, and it's not entirely clear whether it's from this desire or the warmth that's finally warming his limbs.

Will sighs. "You had a right to do that. I made it quite clear that we can't see each other while Hannibal is alive or on the loose. And he hasn't been around for a long time" Graham

removes his gloves, tucking them into the pocket of his jacket, which he takes off next, avoiding looking at Matthew directly, not yet ready for this psychologically, building forts carefully so as not to be overwhelmed by his feelings and emotions. "I didn't visit you because I didn't want to set foot beyond the threshold of the same building where he is now," Will explains softly, tossing his jacket carelessly onto the back of his chair.

Matthew tilts his head sideways, curious, like a dog wondering about his master's condition, waiting patiently for permission to touch, to approach.

Graham finally lifts his gaze to his eyes, but only for a few moments, stunned by the wave of feelings directed at him. The delight almost knocks him off his feet. He swallows awkwardly and holds out his hand, and Matthew, trembling, timidly extends his own in return, allowing Will to touch his frozen fingers. The warmth of his skin is almost scalding, shocking, and Brown can't dare look away from their hands. One moment, another, and then he gets a little bolder and wraps his fingers around the other man's wrist, and in the instant he feels Graham's heartbeat, his own heart begins to beat faster, and a quiet exhale comes off his lips, after which he laughs a little at his own emotionality, meeting Will's gaze again. "This turned out to be a little more emotional than I expected. I'm in danger of starting to look a bit silly and pathetic, don't you think? I feel like Pygmalion."

"At this point, of the two of us, you are a lot more like cold marble," Graham remarks and nods towards the fireplace, letting go of his hand. "You'd better get warm. It's hard to feel someone else's heartbeat when your fingers have frozen off" he turns away, starting to sort out the food and put it away in the fridge.

Matthew stares at him for a few more moments, then obediently moves closer to the hearth, sitting down beside it and extending his hands to the fire. Warming them a little, he rubs his frozen ears with his fingers, wrinkling a bit.

Graham pulls out two glasses and pours the whisky Brown brought him into them, then freezes, watching the man from the side. The dogs, unused to strangers in the house, try to keep a little distance from him, but don't let him out of their sight; they do the same when Will brings home a newcomer. *God, Graham, stop thinking of your admirer as just another mongrel, it's not going to end well!* He sighs and walks around the table to the fireplace and Matthew raises his head, looking up at him from below with an admiring adoration that at first makes Will even a little nervous, but then that unpleasant feeling lets go and he relaxes, somehow feeling intuitively safe around this killer. He holds out his glass to him and Brown accepts it with a smile, while Graham decides, after a moment's thought, to sit down beside him on the carpet - he's a bit cold too. Or perhaps he thinks he is, because of the empathy and the sight of Matthew, who has only just stopped shaking from the cold.

The man's attentive gaze doesn't leave him even for a moment. He licks his lips slightly and strokes the walls of the glass with his fingertip. "Perhaps I should congratulate you on catching your monster," he says thoughtfully in a slightly husky voice. "But I'm afraid we all realize that this is only a temporary separation. I told you: your story will only end with blood."

Will wrinkled his nose, looking at the fire. "There has been plenty of blood. I'm surprised I haven't still drowned in it" he takes a sip of whiskey, and it warms him pleasantly from the

inside as the stranger's gaze wanders over his body. "Matthew," the sound of the name makes Brown fix his gaze on his face, and only then does Graham continue, "don't kill anyone. I don't want sacrifices."

Brown mulls it over for just a few moments, then nods. "I won't kill unless you ask me to," he promises. "After all, there are plenty of other ways to serve my god" Matthew smirks, pleasure sparkling in his eyes at his thoughts as he sips whisky.

Will snorts. "Stop calling me that, I'm not a God."

Brown shrugs his shoulders. "It's just a metaphor, reflecting as accurately as possible my inner state and my attitude towards you, Mr Graham. Really, chill out," he smiles at him. "I'm not going to do anything totally creepy like try to kill you or anything" he casts a glance in the direction of the pile of dogs. "You seem to have a talent for taming naughty dogs. You make me want to be obedient and careful around you. Not as when handling something fragile, but more like under the gaze of an omnipotent god-oh, sorry, I did it again" he laughs.

A defensive reaction, Will thinks. He's in love and in a panic he elevates this feeling to a crazy enough level to feel relatively himself. Graham looks at him intently and then reaches over to his face and touches the scar on his nose. Brown freezes briefly, stunned, and then smiles, tilting his head slightly forward, and the touch goes to the bridge of his nose and his lips touch the base of Graham's palm. Will doesn't push him away. "Where did that scar come from?" he asks instead.

Matthew, happy for a little bit of permissiveness, covers his eyes, inhaling the scent of his hands and touches the skin with his lips once more, very close to where he could feel his heartbeat. Graham moves his hand slightly to smooth his hair and the man begins to smile before he even opens his eyes and looks up at him. "Accidentally let my emotions out and insulted the orderly. They don't like that sort of thing. My bad" he shrugs and then lowers his gaze as Graham lowers his hand. He licks his lips. "Can I see yours?"

"You can see one already" Will shrugs phlegmatically, sipping his whisky, looking at the fire again. Brown tilts his head sideways, gazing into the thin pink line on his forehead, and then, not holding back, reaches out his palm and pulls his hair away a bit, touching that scar with awe. It only lasts for a couple of moments because, sensing the nervous tension from Will, Matthew hurries to cut the touch short and leave the man in peace for a while. "I'm not as sensitive and fragile as you think. We both know your hands are shaking from how desperate you are to establish a communication line appropriate for you. You can take my wrist, I'll be fine" he says, taking another sip.

Matthew hesitates rather for the sake of propriety, so as not to look too wild in his desperate thirst for a touch. He holds back a delighted exhale as Graham shows his discernment again, seeing right through him. One moment. A second. A third. He swallows and finds Will's hand with his palm, wrapping his fingers around his wrist and pulling him a little closer to him without dropping his gaze from the face beautifully lit by the warm light of the fireplace. Suddenly Brown frowns slightly, running the pad of his finger over the barely perceptible scar, and Graham moves his gaze to his worried eyes, answering the unasked question without a word. Matthew silently strokes the scars for a few more moments, and then presses his finger a little harder in a convenient spot, feeling his heartbeat under his skin. "When you

trust someone, you put a knife in their hands - one they can use either to protect you or to destroy you. The Ripper chopped you up like a carpenter chops up wood with a jigsaw, patterning it, spoiling an already perfect creation with his interference in the natural order of things."

Will looks into his eyes with a slight haze of sadness. "You trust me," not a question, but a statement.

"Oh, I am well aware that you are capable of destroying me with one look, Mr Graham," Brown smiles, moving a little closer on the carpet and bringing his hand, continuing to squeeze his other wrist, to his chest, over the thin, light fabric. "Listen. I've never felt more alive than I do now with my heart in your hands."

Will feels a deep beating under his palm, and for a moment it seems to him as if his mind is not entirely cured after all, as if Matthew's heart is actually clenching and unclenching in his palm, bleeding out; the image is both mesmerizing and makes Graham shudder slightly at the realization of his own power. He suddenly slides gently higher up the other man's torso, toward his neck, and Brown's gaze lights up as if he's watching an explosion of hundreds of fireworks in a dark New Year's sky. Will's finger is on his Adam's apple and he swallows, letting the man feel the movement. Graham still pensively continues to move on, showering the warmth of his skin on his ear and his smooth-shaven cheek, and Brown feels his own heartbeat quicken from this simple sudden caress; he covers his eyes slightly and sets himself under the gentle touch, his lips ajar, he touches the dry skin of his fingers with them for just a few moments, and his face is like that of a saint gifted with divine grace. Will's hand slips away, burrowing into his hair, and Matthew obediently tilts his head, feeling as if his whole world shrinks down to just those hands. No one had ever touched him so gently and trustingly; everyone was either unwilling or afraid that a wild mad dog might bite their fingers off. They weren't wrong about that, though, but still...

He hears Will exhale and the touch escapes him. He raises an eager, admiring glance, still tilting his head forward a bit, and looks at Graham, whose heartbeat quickened only slightly in the moment when he recoiled. It was curious. "You're so lost," he remarks suddenly aloud, and Will frowns faintly, looking back at him. Brown straightens up. "Mr. Graham, you are drowning in your own blood. Every thought is of one man, every scar is from him or about him. It is vitally necessary for you to distract yourself. Relax. Have fun. Do you remember what fun is?" he suddenly leans forward slightly, squinting a little slyly, looking up at him and continuing to monitor his heart rate.

Graham finishes his glass of whisky, remaining calm. "Fun is a rather distant concept to me," he remarks a little skeptically. "And I don't find murder funny, Matthew."

Brown snorts. "Your words," he shrugs with a smile. "But that's not what I mean, Mr Graham" he suddenly rises to his feet, releasing his hand, and drains his glass too, looking around. He puts it on the shelf by the fireplace and walks over to the cupboard with the books and CDs for the player. He leans over and drums his hands on the shelf, radiating a light cheerfulness and deceptive cuteness. "Okay, what do we have here...?"

"They're useless. The CD player hasn't worked in years" Graham says, feeling even a slight degree of curiosity about what he's going to come up with now.

Matthew tsks his tongue. "No killing, no music. Dull death, gross!" he rests his hand on the shelf, looking around again, slowly sliding his tongue over the teeth in his mouth. Suddenly he stops his gaze and smirks - he has some idea.

Graham traces the direction of his gaze, but still doesn't get it until Matthew walks decisively over to the long black umbrella standing against the wall, the one Alana has forgotten here a long time ago. Taking it in his hands and examining it from all angles, he hums contentedly and turns to face Will, resting the tip of the umbrella on the floor as if he were using a cane. Graham frowns slightly in an attempt to figure things out, and Brown covers half of his face with his free palm, looking up at the ceiling as if thinking, and then releases his hand and the playful smirk disappears from his face, replaced by a slightly different expression.

It doesn't even take Will a moment to realize that Matthew is parodying Chilton - that expression of overwhelming fear, poorly masked behind the off-duty smile of a man ready to deliver a highly intelligent joke through which he himself believes everyone around him will start thinking of him as an intelligent and knowledgeable man - it is something that cannot be confused with anything else. "Mr Graham, it’s time for you to admit that you are an intelligent psychopath and not some helpless victim of a murderous psychiatrist. Your whole story is an old hat that you borrowed from Abel Gideon. And it would be blatantly stupid of me not to notice this irony, for the sake of which you, obviously, do all of this, just like a typical sociopath" he parodies his voice, recalling Chilton’s words he said at one of Will's first sessions in hospital. Graham just ignored the psychiatrist then, must have been more engrossed in fishing than his fervent speeches.

Now Will first raised his eyebrows, slightly surprised by the former orderly's foolishness, but after a moment he couldn't help it and a chuckle escaped his lips. Matthew smiles contentedly, dropping the Chilton mask and picking up the umbrella normally, spreading it out and throwing it on his shoulder. "Mission accomplished" he declares in his own voice, twirling the umbrella.

"That was awfully silly, not funny" Graham remarks, getting up to pour himself some more whisky, but the smile continues to be present on his face.

"Who cares what made you laugh? All that matters is that my plan works," he proudly raises his chin and then tosses the umbrella aside a little carelessly, returning to Will at arm's length, circling him like Ganymede around his Jupiter. Graham shakes his head, but refills the whisky in his glass as well.

"You're like my dogs" he decides to say though, and Matthew tilts his head to the side with interest. "They start goofing off too when they notice I'm grim again. Chasing their tails and starting licking me and all that" Will snorts, finally daring to look again into the man's eyes; he smiles, looking like a cunning, scheming boy, and sets the glass on the table, keeping his eyes on Graham, flirtatiously leaning closer to him, licking his lips ostentatiously.

"I don't have a tail, but there's still something I can try if you want..." he offers in a purring voice, leaning quite close, and a short but sincere laugh bursts from Will's chest as he gently pulls the pliable Brown away from him, lowering his head as if reflexively hiding his neck from the potential tickle of someone else's tongue. "Just look at me, one victory after another."

"God... you really want to be friends, don't you?" Will asks, sighing, looking at Matthew with a slight smile on his face.

The man licks his lips and gently takes his hand, running his fingers over his scarred wrist. He looks intently into his eyes. "Of course. You make me powerful and helpless at the same time, you look at me and see me, you open your mouth and all your words are like sirens singing. I want all that you're willing to give me" he stands close to Will, tilting his head slightly, looking intently into his eyes and counting the slightly disconcerting beat of his heart. "Passion is so much like fear sometimes" he remarks aloud, as if distracted by his own thoughts, averting his gaze, but after a few moments he looks again into Graham's bright eyes. "Don't you want to be with me, Mr Graham? With what I'm willing to offer you in exchange for the very least?"

Graham's eyebrows quiver slightly in a semblance of a frown, but his face resembles an expression of thoughtfulness rather than displeasure. Matthew waits breathlessly for his words and counts his heartbeats. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven... a little faster than usual. He loses count when Will lightly licks his parched lips. Then he makes a slightly loud sigh and lowers his gaze, averting it to the side. "I want to be normal, that's all."

Matthew smiles slightly. "Well," he says, looking around ostentatiously, "it seems pretty normal to me, huh".

"No, no," Will shakes his head, his stress level, nervousness rising. "None of this is normal, Matthew, and you know it yourself. You... you killed a man for me, you..." he switches to a whisper, *"I told you to kill Hannibal and you almost did"* Graham's heart quickens slightly as he recalls his feelings at the time this was happening. "That's not a normal thing."

Brown no longer smiles; he stares at Will a little tensely, waiting for his final verdict, but the silence between them lingers, and so he has to push him to continue. "Do you want me to leave, Mr. Graham?" he asks softly, gazing into his eyes, hearing Will's heartbeat quicken, as if he's getting anxious at that thought. Like he's afraid of being alone now. Or of what he thinks Matthew might do to him for his reluctance to continue their bonding? "If you ask me to leave, I will leave, Mr. Graham. If you wish to never see me again, I will never be seen by you again. I give you my word."

Will's heartbeat quickens and a look of confusion appears on his face, as if, as has often been the case with him in recent years, he couldn't understand himself.

Matthew decides to continue. "If it would make you happy, I'm all for it," he smiles a little, almost kindly, and leans his head to the side. "So, Mr. Graham?.. And if it were for your desire that I should go into the fire, I'd do it without thinking twice" he recalls words he has read in some old book when he was just a teen. He then considered love a stupidity that happens to others, but not to him, but now he uttered this phrase, and uttered sincerely, meaning every word he said.

Will drops his gaze below his eyes, feeling strange about being able to make a completely independent decision. Despite the war within him, he never finds the strength to voice his answer; however, Brown has already guessed from all the other non-verbal signs that he has not been chased away. He slowly, with the caution of a sapper defusing a bomb, brought his

hand closer to his face, keeping his eyes fixed on his, on those long lashes, on his disheveled curls. Seeing no resistance, only the caution of a frozen statue, he touches his wrist with slightly moist lips, the thin old scars on it, then kisses again and again, and gradually, seeing no disgust or fear but only a slight haze of curiosity, he moves his kisses higher, to his palm and fingers, continuing to peer into the man's face; his eyes suddenly light up with a gleam of amusement and pleasure, and he sticks his tongue out, licking this wrist, leaving a wet trail, and it makes Graham awake from his reverie, withdrawing his hand reflexively.

Brown chuckles softly, looking like a sour cream-eating cat. He tilts his head sideways as he watches Will wipe his hand over his clothes, hiding his gaze, and almost faints when he sees the slight blush on Graham's cheeks.

A slightly nervous chuckle escapes Will’s lips and he buries his hand in his curls. He bites the inside of his cheeks and lips, struggling with an internal moral dilemma, and then finally seems to make up his mind about something. He raises his gaze to Matthew, and that look makes the man's heart skip a beat as if he's been shot. He only has time to blink in amazement before suddenly Graham's hand is already on the back of his head, drawing him closer, and his lips collide with his, like cars in an accident, and Brown feels like he's being electrocuted by the two defibrillators on his chest.

His confusion lasts only a couple of moments and the current sent through his body reaches his heart and he immediately responds to the kiss at the same pace Will set and buries his fingers in his curly hair, with another hand continuing to squeeze his wrist, inebriated by his racing heart. Graham's warm palm rests on his neck, but the touch of his lips is even warmer; the heat of his mouth feels like a sip of mulled wine.

This kiss feels like a shot to the head, draining and fulfilling at the same time. When their lips pull away from each other for a moment, Matthew hears a very quiet sound, like a moan, and he immediately moans himself. "God, you're so divine," he whispers hotly before pulling him back into the kiss, wrapping his arms around his waist as if wanting to snuggle even closer to him, to feel his heart beating with his chest. When the air starts to run out, Brown pulls away from his lips just a little, looking slightly up at Graham's somewhat tilted head, eye to eye. Will looks like a lost kitten, with red cheeks and a confused look. His reddened lips beckon to touch them again, like a wound beckons to be brushed, but Matthew pauses, giving the profiler some time to decide. Graham drops his gaze for a moment, but Brown touches his chin, forcing him to look into his eyes again. "Mr Graham. Just say the words" he whispers on the edge of calm and sensuality.

A prick of memory pierces Will's chest, emotion comes over him, and he feels as if he's standing on a boat about to be swept by a huge wave of feeling, and before it can happen he kisses Matthew again, closing his eyes and mumbling directly into his lips, "Don't let me think."

Brown hesitates only for a moment, feeling an unpleasant chill run down his back, but quickly brushes it off mentally and a smirk reappears on his face. "I can do that," he promises and covers his lips with his own, squeezing his waist and then decides to slip his hands under his shirt to pull it hastily off the man. Brown decides not to think about the fact that he is now being used as a way of escaping reality - in fact, he sees it even as an honor in a way. What

else can he expect? It has been long since he realized that Will is much more than a hawk, and he is no match for him. It's like loving the universe and hoping for reciprocity from the stars.

Suddenly they hear a dog barking and pull away from each other, looking in the direction of the dog looking at them. Will moans annoyed and Matthew laughs softly before kissing Graham on the cheek and taking him again by the wrist. "You know, I haven't slept in a normal bed in years," he remarks with a playful smirk.

Will stares into his face for a few moments before letting go of his hand and heading towards the bedroom. "My bed isn't much more comfortable than a hospital one," he warns, feeling strange, still not believing he's going to do... this. He hadn't been with men since he was a student, and it had only been one extremely bad experience. But somehow it seemed to him that he could try to give Matthew a chance... who knows, maybe he could help him get away from the horrors in his head and relax. Maybe if he wasn't in bed alone, he wouldn't be plagued by another nightmare or... other Hannibal-related dream.

As soon as he opens the bedroom door, Matthew, who was following, immediately hugs him from behind, kicking the door shut behind them while his lips graze Graham's neck. He's been asked to get Will out of his thoughts - and he's sure to do his best. He pulls off his clothes, kissing him behind the ear and burying his nose in his dark curls, then gently lets him fall onto the bed, only to find himself on top a moment later, studying his naked body with his lips, as if he were writing prayers on his pale skin with them. He thinks that Will looks a little thinner - and, for some reason, the thought that this has something to do with Hannibal immediately creeps into his head. He shakes his head slightly, pushing that thought away, and leans against his chest to distract himself, feeling his heartbeat under his lips.

At times he lifts his gaze to look into Will's face and make sure he can continue, that the man is enjoying his worship. When he sees Graham looking up at the ceiling, his lips slightly ajar and with a pleasant blush on his cheeks and neck, he smiles contentedly, going lower, urged on to further action. His lips touch the spot next to his navel and then he traces the line of the scar with his tongue without much thought as suddenly Will shudders all over, sobbing, and grabs his hair without looking. "Stop it! I..." his voice sounds desperate and with a distinct undertone of panic, he bites his lips, squirming, and Matthew waits patiently for his words, looking up at him, feeling only his fingers in his hair. Graham swallows, exhaling. *"I can't,"* he whispers almost painfully, letting go of his head only to cover his face with his palms, trying to calm down, to hide, like a child who thinks that if he can't see anyone, they can't see him either.

Matthew looks at him anxiously, rising a little, and then, without much thought, climbs off him, keeping his gaze on his face, trying to figure out what has happened and what to do now. He thinks of the scar and mentally scolds himself for being careless: some of the wounds belong to Hannibal, and touching them with his hands or tongue is the same as picking them with a knife. Brown touches his chest gently, lying carefully beside him on the bed, mentally counting the beats of his heart, aware that it is too fast now. He licks his lips. "Mr Graham," Matthew calls out, and his fingers twitch slightly, "please look at me, Mr Graham."

Will takes a heavy, ragged breath, but then removes his hands from his face and looks uncertainly at the man beside him. He smiles softly.

"There you go," Matthew gently strokes his cheek with his other hand, wiping away his tears, and then leans in, kissing one of the salty lines near his eye. "It's okay, you can chill out next to me. Wanna talk? I can talk a lot, about everything in the world. I'm very good at it. Or I can listen. Whatever you want. We can close our eyes and you can go fishing near the meadow where I'll be warming up by the fire. Hmm?" he smiles and kisses the corner of his lips one more time before pulling away to look at his whole face, to read every micro-expression on it, to see every detail.

Graham looks back at him, feeling panic replace confusion. He gazes into Matthew's clear eyes, full of submissive adoration, into his slight smile, in which only a faint shadow of sadness can be seen. He tries to unravel this strange admirer, tries to understand what is going on in his head, what he wants from him and how long it will all go on before the feeling of unquestioning adoration and obedience is replaced by disdain and rebellion against God. When this little child who idealizes his figure grows into a teenager who questions all authority? What will then await Graham? A bullet to the forehead or a knife to the liver? Will he make him suffer for all the things he did to his heart? He reluctantly drove a man bent on violence mad, made him fall in love with him.

You bond with your captor - you survive. But who is the kidnapper and who is the kidnapped?

No, with these thoughts, he definitely can't be normal. He needs someone who isn't connected to his past life, someone whose image isn't stained with Hannibal's bloody fingerprints. Someone calm, someone he can talk to without having to talk about all of this. Brown... his level of danger feels familiar, but familiar in Will's case is a far cry from the word 'normal'.

He exhales, relaxing a little, looking at Matthew. Graham's eyes are still a little wet with tears, but his heart has already calmed its pace a bit. "You... you can hold me and we'll sleep in silence and discuss this in the morning," he offers, and Brown readily nods meekly, even smiling a little. This is already more for him than he expected at the beginning of the evening, when he was sitting on the porch freezing like a baby bird that has been abandoned by all the other birds as they fly south without showing it the way.

Brown lies down more comfortably, wrapping his arms around Will, placing his hand over his chest to feel his heartbeat, and can't stop smiling, nestling his nose into his shoulder, covering his eyes. He can feel Graham's chest rise and fall with heavy breaths, and how he relaxes, feeling safe enough beside his believer to fall asleep in his embrace.

It feels good.

Chapter 4

Matthew falls asleep only a couple of hours later and wakes up before Will does, admiring how peacefully he looks. His breathing is calm, and so is his heartbeat, so he doesn't seem to be having nightmares right now. This makes the man smile, and he silently watches his darling deity until he wakes up, possibly feeling such intense attention on himself. Graham takes a slow deep breath and quietly exhales without opening his eyes, then turns his head slightly towards Brown and looks at him, feeling odd the first thing he sees in the morning is someone's smile and loving eyes, not the hungry face of one of his dogs. Although, judging by the look of some desperate need on his face, there really wasn't that much of a difference.

Brown, beaming with a smile, winks at him and it makes Will snort, looking up at the ceiling again. "Good morning, Mr Graham. How was your sleep?" he asks. He watches the expression on the man's face, the way he looks up thoughtfully, as if trying to realize that he really hasn't had any nightmares this night - only the stream of the river he's been fishing in, all alone, only with a hawk sitting nearby on a branch watching him and his every action, like a kind of guardian. "Fine, you don't have to respond. I know that well myself," Matthew smiles softly, unaffected by his reticence. "You know, if you ever want me to, I could visit you sometimes - at any time, just call. I think you and I are having a lovely time together" he runs his fingers across his chest, picking up the heartbeat that remains steady.

"Sooner or later you're going to start getting annoyed with yourself and these inconvenient feelings" Will remarks, looking up again. "You'll want to kill me," these words fly from his lips indifferently, and the beats of his heart don't quicken their pace.

Brown freezes, looking at him for a while without a smile on his face, and then sighs, leaning in, laying his head on his chest. "No matter how many times I tell you with all my sincerity that it's not going to happen, you still won't believe me because you think I just have a crush on you and that it will pass quickly. But that's an overly simplified version of what's really going on. You understand me, you see me. Next to you, I feel naked."

"It must not be the most pleasant feeling for someone like you," Will notes.

"I have no problem with being naked in front of you" Matthew parries with a smirk. "Full nudity implies trust. And I trust you."

"Thereby arbitrarily handing me a knife" Graham says and suddenly frowns, realizing. "You want me to kill you?"

"Only if you want to," Brown sighs with a smile. "But I have no intention of pushing you to do anything. I find interfering in the natural order of things... destructive. I would rather kill for you. Or die for you. Die to protect you."

Graham's heart skips a beat or two in worry, and Matthew calmly turns to face him, placing his palm on the spot where his cheek had been before. Will frowns slightly, clearly puzzled. "It's... a rather self-destructive concept that doesn't particularly suit an average psychopath."

Brown tilts his head sideways with a smile and squints a bit playfully. "Mr. Graham," he utters, almost purring, "did I... surprise you?" he moves a little closer, intending to ask for a kiss so that Will himself would move forward and shorten the remaining distance between their lips, but that doesn't have time to happen - the barking of a bunch of dogs can be heard, and Graham is instantly distracted by this, causing Matthew to sigh and sit up on the bed. "Are they always this loud and insistent in the morning? Even I don't do that" he mutters, looking at Will's back as he gets up a little wary and tense and walks over to the window.

"No," he replies quietly. "They do that when someone approaches the house," Will explains.

Matthew's eyebrows rose in interest and he gets up and walks over to the window, looking out as well. Indeed - a large black car had just started to park nearby, and a familiar figure was getting out - he realizes from a closer look that it's the same FBI agent who shot him in the shoulder years ago and prevented him from ending Hannibal’s life. Brown whistles. "Well, he definitely isn't here because of me. Is he?" he frowns a little playfully. "I swear I haven't had time to do anything in the twenty-four hours I've been out. Scout's honor!"

Will sighs heavily, not in the mood for fun - the mere sight of Jack outside his house was enough to make his eyebrows furrow and a shadow of weariness appear in his eyes. Matthew, observing this change, decides to note something good for himself - like the fact that having a killer obsessed with his identity around was less stressful for Will than the arrival of his former boss.

Without saying anything to him, Graham, as tense as a fishing line pulled by a big fish, leaves the room, putting on a grey T-shirt, and heads for the front door just as Jack knocks on it. Matthew ponders what to do in this situation, and then decides to lurk nearby, in the kitchen, suspecting that Will won't want to let Crawford in, and wanting to overhear their dialogue.

As he makes his way, like a cautious cat, towards the kitchen, he hears the conversation not from the beginning. "...It looks like a copycat. It's like someone after a year has decided it's time to pay homage to Hannibal by starting to kill the way he killed. To impress him or something" Jack's voice is a little tired and strained, and Matthew wishes he could see him from this angle, to read his intentions.

Will sighs heavily, exhausted. "What do you want from me, Jack? I'm not doing this anymore and I don't have any plans to ever go back to any thoughts of Hannibal again. And I certainly don't have the slightest desire to search for a new cannibal in Baltimore," he sounds confident and annoyed, as he should, and Matthew smiles a little with a sense of pleasant pride, but his mood is immediately struck down by Jack's next words:

"That's not why I'm here, Will," he says almost coldly, and a brief silence hangs after this phrase, as if everyone involved in the conversation needs time to prepare for the question, which does feel like a slap in the face. "Where were you last night, Will?"

Graham blinks, unable to believe his ears, and then frowns, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times, unsure how to manage his indignation at this assumption from his old friend. "Hold on, am I your first suspect?"

"Don't act like you'd think of anyone else if you were me, after seeing the display of corpses arranged in the format of a bloody Botticelli's Primavera and with missing hearts. Where have you been, Will?"

The voice is steel and sorrow. Poisoned by his own doubts, devoured by them from within as if they were parasitic worms.

The former profiler straightens up, biting his lip for a few moments before still answering with a coldness in his voice. "I've been here. Got back from the shop at 7pm, and from then until now I've been here, in my house, where I spend most of my time trying to forget everything that's happened, Jack," the intonation is almost accusatory, as bitter as Crawford's words had been before.

For a couple of moments they just stare at each other, tense, dissatisfied with the situation they've put themselves in. "Can anyone confirm that, Will?" asking this question, Jack thinks he already knows the answer.

Matthew smirks, feeling the weight of Graham's silence, and before the agent can say anything else, Brown declares with a flavor of anticipatory victory on his tongue: "I can" and with a determined stride steps out of the kitchen and approaches Graham, who turns around at the sound of footsteps with a slightly bewildered look - but certainly not as bewildered as Jack's. Matthew smiles broadly, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb, unobtrusively shielding Will's figure with his. "I've been here from 5pm until now, not taking my eyes off Mr Graham even for an instant exactly since he drove his car up to the house. I'm Matthew Brown, by the way - I don't know if you remember me, but I'm the man you shot in the shoulder before I could kill the Chesapeake Ripper."

The intonation doesn't suggest an accusation, but it is still there. Matthew looks at the FBI agent boldly and openly, with a slight smile, enjoying his shock and complete lack of comprehension.

"Oh, and before you get nervous - I don't want you to - I should explain that I've officially been released, I'm a completely sane and free man" sparks of amusement play in his eyes, because he knows that none of this is entirely true - except that he's been released, of course. His mental state is questionable, and it's pretty hard to speculate about freedom when you're on a leash.

Jack finally comes to his senses after all, continuing to be as tense as a cornered lion. "What are you doing here, Mr Brown?"

"What am I doing here..." he says deceptively thoughtful, clucking his tongue and looking around, and smirking at Will before looking at Crawford again. "Just hanging out with a friend of mine. Decided to celebrate my long-awaited freedom with a little pajama party - whiskey, fireside chat, jailhouse stories, spin the bottle game, all that" his smile is cheeky and definitely provocative and doesn't fade despite the scowl and disgruntled look from the law enforcer. "Actually, I wouldn't show my face to you so brazenly so as not to embarrass or discredit Mr Graham with my presence under his roof, but I figure that once your suspicions about him are off, you'd definitely be targeting me, since I'd so luckily got out of the hospital the day before it happened, so I'd have had to tell you where I was anyway, and that would

have been less convincing and even a little more exhausting for Mr Graham than what's going on right now," he tilts his head to the side, licking his lips.

He keeps his gaze on Jack, and Jack keeps his gaze on him, even when he's not talking to him anymore. "Tell me what's going on, Will," Crawford demands, must be ready to grab his gun. "I'm having a very unpleasant feeling of deja vu right now."

"No matter what I tell you, Jack, you still won't believe me," Graham sighs. "If people were killed that night, I can tell you with certainty that Matthew had nothing to do with it, because he was with me the whole time. And I didn't kill anyone. If I wanted to make Dr. Lecter feel good, it would have been enough for me just to come and see him. It's far less energy consuming than murder, and more effective." He wrinkles his nose wryly, and Matthew smirks, looking at him with his usual adoration. Crawford clearly looks incredulously first at Brown and then at Will, and Matthew doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to know that he doesn't trust them. "That's it, Jack," Graham says, "you'd better start looking for this murderer, because if this is really something serious, I'll probably soon be the main target of this admirer," he indicates Matthew to step back with a barely visible gesture, and then, after giving Jack a frown, closes the door.

Brown is pensively silent, as if he's just realized the danger Will might be in if he's right - and he's almost always right in such cases. He tenses a little, staring at the wall, contemplating how he could keep Graham safe, when he suddenly utters, sighing heavily:

"Now he's sure we killed those people together."

Matthew blinks, coming to his senses, and the same old sly grin blooms on his face as he looks at Will, tilting his head to the side in a slight flirtation. "Oh. Sexy."

Graham either chuckles or snorts, turning away and walking to the kitchen to make coffee. "Looks like as long as I'm alive, the Ripper theme won't get away from me."

Matthew watches out the window for a couple of seconds as Jack, after getting into his car, continues to stay there, not intending to leave that quickly (obviously not trusting Brown), and then turns to Will and follows him into the kitchen. "Do you want me to deal with this copycat for you?" he asks.

"Matthew, I've already said I don't want you to kill for me" Graham reminds him.

"And who said anything about killing?" Brown asks, smiling as Will turns his incomprehensible gaze on him. "Well, I mean, I'd love to deal with him in that sense, but I'm not stupid and I have a good memory, I remember your decree. No sacrifices and all that. I mean, I could just find him. And then anonymously tell the police about him. I can even hide my face somehow so he won't recognize me while I tie him to some pole... or I can just knock him out from behind. It depends," he smiles, proud of his plan.

"Why don't you put on a Batman mask as well?" Will grins skeptically, placing a cup of coffee on the table for Matthew while he takes a sip from the other.

"Well no, it's just too much of a cliché," he rolls his eyes, taking his coffee, noting to himself with pleasure that Graham had made it especially for him. "Make myself a hawk mask, with a beak," Brown jokes, squinting mischievously.

"Hawks in pursuit of prey can behave very recklessly and, because of the ecstasy of the chase, fail to notice obstacles on their path and sometimes crash into a tree," Will remarks in a calm and even tone. "A fallen and wounded bird can become an easy prey even for a weak predator" he raises his gaze to Matthew, glaring eloquently at him.

Brown breaks into a smile, resembling a Cheshire cat. "You worry about me," he purrs, propping his chin up with his palm, and Will doesn't even move an eyebrow, continuing to stand there with a stone face. Matthew rolls his eyes. "Okay, fine, whatever. But I still worry about you, too. Maybe I'll stay with you until that psychopath gets caught, hmm?"

"For what?"

"Well, in order to protect you in case he comes, of course. The two of us have a much better chance together. Hawks and all" he winks, hiding a smile in his cup.

Will... gives this thought time to grow in his head. He appreciates his privacy and, moreover, has promised himself to start a normal life, removing as far as possible anything that might remind him of Hannibal, just so he won't go back to that chapter of his life, not to let his heart betray him. Tonight, on the other hand, with Matthew’s hand on his chest, he slept really well and completely peacefully for the first time in years. Besides, he had a strong feeling that if he sent Matthew away, he'd make a mess of things and it wouldn't end well.

And as for this new copycat... Will had no desire to meet them. Thanks to Lounds, everyone knew that whatever was going on between Lecter and Graham was definitely something special. He'd tried to kill him twice, and it would make sense on the part of this man to want to finish Hannibal's unfinished business without even realizing that Hannibal himself didn't really want to finish it. Will suddenly becomes the least bit curious as to whether Hannibal himself is aware of this danger when he reads about his copycat in the papers. Probably not. Or rather, he doesn't see it as a danger, but more as another opportunity for Will to kill someone in self-defense with impunity. Asshole.

"I don't think cohabitation with a murderer fits into the conventional understanding of normal" Graham notes after all.

Matthew sighs as he looks at him and then, after thinking about it, puts his mug down on the table and walks around him to boldly take Will by both wrists and look him in the eye. "Mr Graham, listen to me very carefully, I beg you - your future depends on it, do you understand? Normality is a flexible state of mind. What is normal to one is not normal to another. It is normal for many people to make eye contact with each other while talking, but it is more difficult for you. For you, it is normal to go fishing in the early morning and have a pack of dogs in the house; for others, it seems insane. You don't want a normal life, Mr Graham. You want peace of mind. You want your conscience to stop gnawing at you. Maybe you want to get rid of Hannibal Lecter, get him out of your head - but you know that's impossible. You know what's possible? To accept it and to enjoy it. Acknowledge your power. To go with the flow, you know?" he smiles, feeling Will’s heart speed up a little and

his pupils dilate for a moment. "Understand that you not only can't - you don't want to live like everyone else. A nice wife, kids, a regular job, a beer on a Friday night. If you try to live like that, you will soon find yourself trying to play a role in a play that isn't for you and that causes you nothing more than mild disgust. But even after you realize this, you will continue to play this role out of pity and guilt, because you will know that you have already dragged good people into this whole thing - people who do not deserve to be deceived and betrayed by you" he tilts his head sideways, smiling softly. "Don't get yourself into this, don't get yourself into a dead end just because someone painted a sign before the turn that normality is right there. Don't substitute terms, Mr Graham. You want rest, peace of mind? Do what you love. You want understanding or caring? I'm here for you. Besides, if anything, I'm not the one to be pitied, am I? Don't say anything, I can feel your heartbeat quickening, you're worried because you're an empath and a good person. Hardly because you like me, I know that myself. Not yet, your thoughts are occupied with other things… and other people, but that's okay. Still, if I die for you... Well, you know... perhaps it'll be just fine" he gives him a smile, looking into his eyes with some sort of naivety that he certainly didn't really have. Matthew could be called a lot of things, but not naive. He knows what he's doing, and he knows that he's doing this for love.

Will looks into his face as if trying to see something through the cracks of a broken mirror, and all he sees through them is a young man desperately in love with the stars, needing his god wholeheartedly, willing to do anything for him. Loyalty. Trust. Truth. No deception, no half-truths, no word games and word-juggling. It's as simple and straightforward as working with boat engines.

Just exactly what he needs.

"Okay."

Chapter 5

Will is fishing alone in the early morning hours, wrapped up in a warm jacket in an attempt to escape the cold. In a month's time, spring is due to arrive, and with that in mind, the thought flashes through his mind that it might be nice to take Matthew with him when it gets warmer. The man doesn't like the cold (and warm clothing), so for now, for his health's sake, Graham is spending this leisure time alone - but when the sun finally starts to warm up and not just shine, he might... teach him to fish? This idea seems strange, and thoughts of Abigail and, therefore, Hannibal immediately try to surface, hissing, from the recesses of his mind, and Will flinches and so does the rod in his hands - and because of this misstep he loses a potential catch.

He sighs heavily. He and Brown have been together for less than a month, and no matter how hard Brown tries, he hasn't been able to get Lecter out of Graham's head in that amount of time, not at all. Hannibal is worse than a tattoo; he's a scar, a missing spleen and a hole in his head and heart. No matter how much care Matthew showed, Will kept thinking about the Ripper several times a day.

The nightmares, though, seemed to be diminishing. Sleeping in someone else's arms was unusual, but in a good way (which Will found surprising), and just having Brown around, the warmth of his body and the weight of his palm on his heart soothed his mind enough for him to finally start really getting some sleep at night. He'd already forgotten what it felt like. So Graham didn't regret his decision - at least not yet.

Usually in the morning, when Will went fishing, Matthew was still asleep in bed, waking only briefly to watch Graham change and drop a few sleepy jokes about how the most abnormal thing about Will was his willingness to get up at almost five in the morning to sit in the cold and stare at the float. Then he probably slept for a while longer, and by the time the former profiler returned to the house with his catch, he was already preparing their breakfast.

He never cooked meat, knowing on an intuitive level that it would not be the best thing to do. Instead, he limited himself to scrambled eggs, salads, coffee, some porridge or sandwiches. No extravagance, his meals always looked perfectly ordinary, and there was something... so normal about it. Graham eventually began to realize that to him, normal was perceived as essentially anything that was the opposite of what Hannibal did and was in his life. And here it was hard to tell whether it was really about Lecter and his abnormality, or about Will's post-traumatic stress disorder. He didn't think it was important to think about it seriously, and just went with the flow, as Matthew had advised.

Sometimes, when he returned, the food was already on the table, and Brown was exercising - doing push-ups or sit-ups, or just stretching. Over a meal he chatted a lot - about his dreams, or the news, or the movie they'd seen the night before, or memories from childhood or the hospital - and after a while he went for a jog around the house while Will walked the dogs and watched him from the sidelines.

They went out to the shop together, once every few days. Their first time, Matthew went straight to the candy section and picked up a bunch of stuff and popped a lollipop in his mouth before they were even out the supermarket doors. So Will found out that Brown, apparently because of his childhood, was a sweet tooth. He found it even a little bit cute and... very human. Normal.

After that, Graham was usually working - dealing with boat engines and other components. Matthew would either leave him alone during this time, giving him time for privacy, or, if he thought he hadn't used up Will's social battery yet, would sit beside him and chat with him while he worked.

They no longer kissed the way they had that night - Brown didn't want to intrude on Graham's personal space or be too imposing, limiting himself to cuddling in bed at night, and Will himself was still unsure whether or not he wanted this, and he had no idea how to go about it either. This whole thing was new to him. Abnormal normality. He knew he could kiss Matthew at any moment and he would be absolutely fascinated, but he still didn't dare. Was cautious, gradually probing the boundaries that would be comfortable enough for himself.

Sometimes, to avoid pestering Graham with conversations, Brown would play games on his phone, staying close by but out of the way of his feet and thoughts. He seemed to be fine with it all, and Will only wondered if he was going to be fine with it for long. For some reason, it seemed to Will that Matthew could be quite patient in this regard. At least patient enough for Will.

Of course, sometimes he couldn't help but notice his tension as well. The wannabe was still out there, and from Freddie Lounds' article they soon learned of another victim, a wound man. Another offering, and Graham purposely didn't dig into the details so as not to start having hallucinations or nightmares again. Matthew read and knew everything, but did not discuss it with Will, and the man could only occasionally see him staring too tensely out the window or frowning as he read the tattlercrime.com. He always checked the surroundings of the house before going to bed, listening intently to the nightly silence of the backwoods, in those moments looking like a real watchdog. But the watchdog turned into a lovesick puppy the moment he caught Graham's eye, as if he could not help smiling at him. He was in love.

That was still hard for Will to fully understand it.

So he just went with the flow.

Graham checks the time on his wristwatch and begins to pack, knowing that by this time Matthew is usually starting to get worried, like a dog poking his head out the window, trying to see his delayed owner on the horizon. He picks up today's catch, puts away his rod and gears, and strolls toward home.

He frowns for a moment when he doesn't hear the expected barking, frozen with his hand over the doorknob, and then he listens closely and realizes that he can hear... some music? He hesitantly opens the door and, shaking off the snow from his boots, steps inside, peering into the kitchen, from which the familiar cheerful melody was pouring.

...Smells like something I've forgotten

Curled up died and now it's rotten

I'm not a gangster tonight

Don't wanna be a bad guy

I'm just a loner baby

And now you've gotten in my way…

Will's eyebrows go up, and he stops at the threshold of the room, watching Matthew baking pancakes on a pan, picking one up with a spatula and flipping it. At his feet, as he sways to the beat and sings the words of a Scissor Sisters' song, two dogs obediently wait for a treat, and Brown generously gives them two small slices of pancake. He himself is wearing only his usual gray sweatpants, and Graham spends a few moments looking at his tattoos, the meaning of which he never dared to ask about.

"I can't decide whether you should live or die - oh, you'll probably go to heaven, please don't hang your head and cry..." Matthew sings along, continuing to sway slightly to the rhythm of the song. He isn't much of a singer, but his sincerity and nonchalance make it totally irrelevant, and Will smiles a little.

Brown suddenly turns around a bit to throw away a burnt pancake - clearly not his first, judging from the trash can - and flinches when he sees Graham. "Oh my God! Enjoying your Peeping Tom role over there?" bursts out from him, but his face immediately lights up with a smile. "Hi!"

"You fixed the CD player," Will remarks instead of answering, while Matthew turns the music down a bit and returns to the frying pan. "And you're making pancakes."

"Very perceptive, as always, Mr. Graham," Brown smiles cheerfully, pouring the mixture into the pan. "Yes, I did, and yes, I do. Had to watch a couple of tutorial videos on YouTube for all of this. How was today's catch? You're a little longer than usual," he remarks, glancing at his watch.

"Pretty warm today," the explanation is so-so, but Matthew accepts it, nodding. "And I caught a little more than usual," he heads to a separate table with the fish, bypassing Winston, who is licking after the pancake he just ate. "You're spoiling them and ruining their appetite," Will notes.

"Just absolutely shamelessly trying to win their affection so I can get close to the owner through them," Brown smiles smugly. "And I'm pretty good at it. Right, Max?" he asks, and the dog barks in a yes. "Told you."

Graham laughs, feeling comfortable in this routine as he washes his hands in the sink. "He's just begging you for more pancakes," Will denies, but Matthew only snorts and reaches for the player, turning up the volume, starting to sing along again:

"Oh, I could throw you in the lake, or feed you poisoned birthday cake - I won't deny I'm gonna miss you when you're gone" he artistically puts his flour-stained hand to his bare chest, and Will laughs, shaking his head. *"Oh, I could bury you alive, but you might crawl out with a knife and kill me when I'm sleeping, that's why..."*

"Listen, Matthew, I've been thinking-" Graham begins, about to tell the man about the idea of going fishing together in the spring, but they are suddenly interrupted by several dogs barking from the living room all at once. The music in the song fades just in time, and Will frowns at Matthew, who no longer has the same smile on his face. He leans against the window, trying to look outside, and sighs, rolling his eyes.

"Uncle Jake is back to ruin all our fun. Are you sure you still mind me killing for you?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at Will.

Graham doesn't answer, sighing and heading for the door, eager to be done with it as soon as possible. Brown stays in the kitchen, turning down the music a little so he can overhear their conversation, and turns the last pancake in the pan with his ears perked up.

"Have you come to ask me about my alibi again?" Will asks defiantly as he opens the door, not intending to let the FBI agent inside.

"Hello, Will," the man politely and on the verge of composure greets him. "No, you're not a suspect, don't worry," he says, and Matthew snorts quietly - he can easily tell even from his tone that this is bullshit, and no one really believes Will, just as usual - he may not be suspect number one now, but he's at least one of the top five for sure. "A new body was discovered tonight, and I thought you might want to help us close this case as soon as possible, because..."

"You thought wrong, I don't care, Jack, I don't want to do it again," Graham says sharply. "I'm not going to get into the head of another psychopath just because the FBI behavioral unit can't do its job."

Mathew opens his mouth admiringly, glancing at the dogs with a cheerful grin. He can imagine the look on Jack's shocked face.

"Will. Don't be like this. Fear makes you rude," Crawford notes. "We can find this bastard, but how many people he manages to kill before then is an entirely different matter, you understand this? We'll do it faster with you, and you know it. Come on, Will. Just help me find him, and then you can finally get some good sleep. You said yourself, you're the sweetest prey for this psycho."

In Will's silence, Matthew hears doubt, humility... then he sighs heavily. "This is the last time, Jack. Next time you knock on my door without my invitation, I won't open it. I promise you that," he steps aside, letting the nodding Crawford in, and Matthew stays in his place, with a friendly wave of his hand greeting the man, who is once again taken aback at his sight.

"Pajama party again?" Jack asks skeptically and ironically, and Brown smiles smugly.

"Yeah," he says, folding his arms across his chest and glancing at Will, who sighs quietly behind the agent's back. "And you've come to torment Mr. Graham with memories of his old scars again? How rude," he tsks his tongue.

"Your being here raises a lot more questions and suspicions in my mind," Jack begins with irritation. "I don't know what game you're up to or what's even going on here, but-"

"Matthew," Will calls out, interrupting Jack, and Brown focuses his usual smiling gaze on him. "Can you please take the dogs out for a walk for a while?" he says, wiping his glasses with his T-shirt and putting them on.

Matthew bows his head obediently and makes an elegant wave of his hand, "always at your service, Mr. Graham." He straightens up, smiling, and heads for the exit, putting his sweatshirt right over his flour-dirty body and his jacket over it, beckoning all the dogs by whistling to them. Only when he leaves does Graham lean his waist against the tabletop and look up at Jack, waiting for pictures.

But Crawford is in no hurry at all - as if people's lives did not depend on the speed of the investigation at all. "Will, I'd love to have an explanation for what's going on."

Graham sighs, turning away to the window from which he can see Brown already running around with the dogs, playing with them, throwing sticks, deliberately trying to move fast and much so as not to freeze. "Yes, I'd like that too," the man says thoughtfully.

"You can't explain to yourself why a homicidal psychopath is playing with your dogs and walking around in your kitchen half-naked?" Jack asks. "Tell me, don't you see how bad this all looks?"

Will shrugs, still watching from the window. Max tries to jump on top of Brown, resting his front paws on his body. Winston runs around them, as if he were chasing his tail. The others eagerly wait for the stick to be thrown to them again.

"That's not bad," Graham says suddenly, which causes Crawford to raise his eyebrows. Will smiles a little, then looks at the FBI agent again. "He hasn't done any harm to me, Jack. And I've got everything under control, believe me."

"Will..." Crawford tries to begin, but he can't find the right words to describe the absurdity of the situation, so he just sighs and looks away, also staring out the window, but without the same tenderness that came over Will when he saw that sweet picture - no, his face is frowned and strained.

They are silent for a short time. Brown sits on his knees in the snow and scratches behind Buster's ear, smiling wide.

"You know what I thought when I saw him back then, saying he can confirm your alibi?" the agent asks.

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," Graham snorts, but that certainly doesn't stop Jack.

"I immediately remembered coming to Hannibal to ask about his alibi for the night Abel Gideon was kidnapped," Crawford says firmly, and Will frowns and looks at him a little confused. "When I asked if anyone could confirm that he had been home all night, Alana showed up, wearing his shirt. As we found out some time later, he probably drugged her with something to prevent her from waking up while he was stealing Gideon from the hospital in the middle of the night."

Will is silent for a while, then wrinkles his nose, looking out the window again. "I was right. I didn't want to hear this."

Silence falls again, interrupted by a heavy sigh from Crawford. "I don't know what you're hoping for, but this isn't going to end well for anybody. But I'm still more worried about the other killer - if it's the other one," he says, pulling out an envelope with some pictures and a crime-scene report from his inside pocket. He puts it all on the countertop beside Will.

"Matthew hasn't killed anyone since he was discharged, Jack. I can confirm that - he's hardly ever left my side."

"Can you skip the details?"

Graham rolls his eyes as he opens the file and glances over the lines. The usual information, exactly what he expects to read: death occurred at night, around three o'clock, the victim was a white male, 33 years old, brown hair, blue eyes. An incision had been made in the abdomen... Will rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, knowing exactly where this was going. The corpse also had no ears, no eyes, and no tongue.

He puts the report away and turns his attention to the pictures, staring at them for about a minute, then closes his eyes, swallowing.

The pendulum swings. One. Two. Three.

The victim is strapped to the surgical table, and he has just regained consciousness, trying to figure out where he is and what is going on. He looks around as much as the straps I've tied him with let him. He notices me and panic grips him, he tries to twitch, to break free, to escape, but he fails.

I look him in the eye, dressed in a surgical gown, gloves and mask, fully equipped and ready for surgery. I don't feel sorry for him, but not because he's bad or guilty of anything. His only sin is his appearance. I've been looking for someone who fits all the parameters for a long time, and I finally found him.

He's not a pig to me. Not a meat. He's a doll that I want to make look right and gift-wrapped. This isn't a warning - I don't care about the police or Graham, I'm only doing this for one person, for whom it's ***a promise****. If you behave yourself, Santa will give you a beautiful corpse for Christmas.*

"Nothing personal, Mr. Prechley," I say, and then I take a scalpel from my desk and, referring to a photo printed from the TattlerCrime.com, make a cut identical to the one the Ripper inflicted on the man who betrayed him. The victim screams, but I don't care - I just wrinkle my nose and turn up the music, staining the player with scarlet blood. Then I ponder what to do next, because the picture seems unfinished. At first I think about taking his heart... but then another idea hits me. I smile, but it can't be seen behind the mask, and I lean in, taking the man's left ear and confidently and calmly cutting it off. I haven't done it yet, but it turns out to be quite easy, though Mr. Prechley tries to reflexively dodge the pain. A little more and he'll pass out from shock, pain, and incomprehension. I don't care.

I move to the second ear. Will Graham didn't listen to you, he doesn't need them. Then I cut off his tongue: Will Graham lied to you, he doesn't deserve it. I move on to the eyes - Will Graham was unable to see what you wanted to give him, so why would he need them?

The man on the table is already dead. I pull back a little, staring at him while classical music plays in the background. My lips curl into a delighted smile. The rehearsal went well - all that's left is to present this aperitif.

I lay him on the boat, all covered in blood, and put a white sheet over him in the motif of Greek paintings - you like that style, I've seen your drawings, I know your tastes. You will find out about this murder from our favorite newspaper, and you will understand everything. This is my love letter to you, old friend. A gratitude you didn't ask for.

This is my design.

Will opens his eyes, feeling like he's about to throw up. He tosses the pictures aside on the countertop and picks up a glass, filling it with tap water and drinking it quickly, splashing the rest on his face. He looks up to the window and sees that the dogs are already pulling Matthew toward the house.

Graham swallows and looks at Jack. He trembles slightly and folds his arms across his chest in a protective gesture. "They met," he says the only information he thinks Crawford might have missed.

"His patient?" the agent asks, and Will shakes his head.

"I don't know. Probably not, it's... a surgeon, someone they worked with at the hospital together. Maybe he interned when Lecter worked there, or was a colleague of his, they did surgeries together... I don't know if he's still working in medicine or quit, he could very well be a psychiatrist too, you know... or if it's a patient... hell, Jack, I don't know, it's a cold-blooded psychopath sending valentines to another psychopath, it's not as simple as usual... the only thing I can definitely see is that he's obsessed with Hannibal, and obsession... that's a pretty universal thing. Anyone can make a god for themselves," he looks out the window again, as if hoping that Matthew will come back sooner and help him calm down. He frowns at this thought and these feelings, they are somehow foreign - he once felt something remotely similar with Hannibal. It echoes painfully in his heart.

"Okay, we'll check on his former colleagues, Will," Jack nods, putting away the papers and pictures. "Do you think Lecter knows who it is?"

"He may have some ideas," Will sighs. "Ask him. Although I already know what he'll say," he wrinkles his nose.

"That he'll tell this, but only you," Crawford realizes, and Graham nods. "Would you rather die than talk to him, Will?"

"Honestly, I don't know, Jack," he says, and the door of the house finally opens, and the dogs and a freezing Matthew, with his ears and nose red from the cold, run inside at once. Normally he would always go to the fireplace to warm himself after a walk, but now he heads straight to the kitchen, taking a quick glance at the situation, lingering on Will, noticing his tension. A mute question freezes in his eyes. "Hannibal almost certainly knows who the copycat is. Jack wants me to ask him about it," Graham explains.

Matthew purses his lips, glancing at Crawford and then looking a little anxiously at Will again. "Almost certainly," he remarks and sighs. "I can visit him so you don’t have to," he offers. "He told me enough without words last time."

Graham chuckles. "No, no, that's not an option. And he won't tell you anything, won't give you a name. And you're not going to get much out of yes or no questions, so take it easy, Matthew," he says, and Brown sighs, copying his pose a little, crossing his arms over his chest, too. "Jack, I told you - it's probably someone from the hospital, his colleague or an intern. Better just start looking now." Will shakes his head tiredly, looking at Crawford scowling. "Go away."

"You think you need protection? I could send a guard here," Jack says, stepping back to get his coat.

"Jack, *I think I already have a guard,"* Will remarks, and then smiles a little twitchily, still all nervous.

Matthew raises his eyebrows and smiles slightly as he looks at Graham, then looks at Crawford again, stepping away from the table. "You heard him. I think you'll find your own way out of here, Agent Crawford," he says with a smile, taking pleasure in seeing the agent's partly confused, partly disgruntled face.

As soon as the door closes, Will exhales heavily, closing his eyes, putting his glasses to the side, and Matthew takes his hands, circling his wrists gently and encouraging him to look at himself without a word. Graham has spent less than half an hour beside Jack and he already looks like he hasn't slept in days, so haggard his expression is. It makes him a little angry and frustrated - based on Matthew's subjective experience, Jack can only mess things up and hurt people.

"It's dumb of me. It'll take too long for them to find the right one," Will says. "It would be much quicker just to talk to him."

"You don't want to, and we both know it," Brown parries in a quiet voice a little quieter than usual, and then places one of Graham's hands on his chest so he can feel his heartbeat. "Look, we know you're going to be next, right? Great. Then there's nothing to worry about - you've gotten out of similar situations more than once, and now you're not alone - you've got me. And I swear to you that I will protect you, no matter what it takes. Do you believe me?"

Will looks at him, feeling his heart pounding even through the fabric of his sweater, and hesitantly looks into his eyes, seeing such a loyalty in them that it makes him feel a treacherous prick in his chest. He feels sad that he can't look at Matthew the same way.

After thinking about it, he still finds the strength to nod, and Brown's face immediately lights up with a smile.

"Great. And now, breakfast!" he proclaims, and the dogs immediately bark, which makes Matthew laugh. He reluctantly lets go of Will's hands to grab a plate of pancakes, when suddenly Will stops him, and, wrapping his palms around his face, kisses him on the lips.

Like the first time, it feels like a headshot, and Brown raises his eyebrows, not expecting it for the first couple of moments, but then puts his arms around his waist and responds to the kiss, skillfully taking the initiative, making Graham surprised, his hands dropping somewhat hesitantly to his shoulders as Matthew angles his head slightly back. Will feels himself falling, though the possessive grip on his waist is quite firm.

He breaks the kiss first, pulling back a little, looking as if in a fog at Brown's slightly ajar lips and his eyes closed in disbelieving pleasure, and then tentatively pulls his hands away from his shoulders. "Breakfast," he says softly, and Matthew nods with his eyes still closed, as if trying to calm his heartbeat, and then pulls away. Watching him, Will notices him licking his lips and kneading his fingers, as if he's really been knocked out by this sudden scene.

Graham smiles a bit, almost imperceptibly, and his features soften a little, as if he's already completely forgotten about Jack's arrival and the killer who's about to cut off several parts of his body.

In any case, nothing bad will happen over breakfast.

His heart can calm down for a while.

Chapter 6

It is dark where he is, like at the bottom of the ocean, and the suffocating feeling in his chest only adds points to this metaphor. He leans over someone's body, which he cannot yet see, mindlessly touching the exposed skin with his palms, and then he looks up and shudders, the next moment feeling as if he is paralyzed. A wendigo looms over him like a God in the sky, staring at him with his black, empty eyes. Suddenly a strong white light hits him in the face, like a flash, and Graham bows his head, seeing Matthew's dead body in his arms. He wants to crawl away in panic, but he can't, his hands and feet seem to be bound by the strings of the puppeteer. He recklessly pulls his hand to the middle of Brown's chest, and lets out a sharp sob, feeling his beating heart.

Unable to control himself, acting more like a mere observer than an active participant, he watches as Brown's ribcage opens on its own, dark blood pours from the edges of the wound, his ribs bend, and Will's hands reach for his heart, pulling it from his chest.

It keeps beating in his palm, and Will looks up to see Hannibal Lecter there instead of the wendigo in his usual shape, with his gaze stern and calm in his confidence. Without taking his eyes off the psychiatrist, he brings the heart to his mouth and takes a bite out of it.

Hannibal smirks proudly and contentedly.

Will shrieks when he is abruptly grabbed by the wrist and he lowers his gaze to see Matthew's adoring gaze directed at him.

"Mr. Graham."

"Mr. Graham!" the voice calls out to him, forcing him to wake up from his nightmare, and Will sits up abruptly on the bed, breathing deeply and quickly; his heart in his chest beats as fast as if he has just run a marathon, and he feels how sweaty the sheets beneath him are. His gaze can't focus on the room for a while longer, and only a firm grip on his wrist soothes him, and he looks at Matthew: there's a worry in his eyes, a slight hesitation, like he wants to help more but is afraid he won't be allowed to, or that he'll only make things worse.

Graham exhales slowly, closing his eyes and falling again with the back of his head on the pillow.

"Shall I get you something?" Brown asks uncertainly, and Will shakes his head, taking Matthew by the forearm to pull him toward him, forcing man to lie back down on the bed, and he willingly does so. "Got it, I- oh!" he is surprised a little as the movement continues and Graham wraps his arms around him, laying his head on his chest, listening for his heart. "Wow. Okay," Matthew says still a little shocked, and, after thinking about it, runs his fingers through Will's hair, starting to stroke it a little, and the man doesn't mind.

Playing with his hair, Brown wonders what Graham might have been dreaming about. His mind has been a mystery to everyone, and he's been through so much, seen so many horrors, that Matthew is certainly not surprised that Will is haunted by all kinds of bad dreams. He'd

had them a couple of times over the weeks, but it had been different: either he'd managed to calm him down without even waking him, or Graham had woken up in a panic and gone to the shower to wash the horror that had settled on his skin off. He'd never stayed around before. Never took the initiative to hug his admirer's body. All of this made Matthew feel blessed.

They lie like this for quite some time, but neither of them ever falls back to sleep. Will gradually relaxes under the gentle touches, and then finally sighs with some calm. "I have to go into town tonight. Are you with me?" he asks, not pulling away.

"Of course, Mr. Graham," Matthew replies in a sleepy, husky voice, and Will hears his smile. "Shall we go shopping?"

Graham mutters in agreement.

They lie for a while longer, and then Will gets up and takes a shower. They have breakfast together, then walk the dogs, and then drive Graham's car toward town. Matthew chooses his own music and, after turning on a song loud enough, he casually sings along to the words, drumming his fingers on his knee as usual. From time to time he distracts himself to take a bite of the sandwich he hastily made before going out. Will smiles a little, staring at the road in silence.

He suddenly stops the car abruptly, his gaze becoming anxious, and Brown becomes confused, looking at him and then to where his gaze is directed, toward the roadside, where a dirty white dog, small, slightly larger than Buster, was sitting.

Matthew looks at Will again, studying his face curiously as he bites his lip, as if trying to convince himself that it doesn't make much difference whether he has seven dogs or eight. A smile spreads across Brown's face, and he gets out of the car first, causing Graham's confusion.

He looks at his sandwich and pulls out a piece of cheese and sausage, approaching the dog carefully, holding it out for a treat, whispering affectionate words, beckoning it to him. It moves back away from him tentatively at first, but after sniffing around, it still begins to approach Matthew tentatively, until finally it is close enough for him to take the sausage; he scratches it behind the ear, looking back at Will, who has only now managed to get out of the car.

"The girl limps a bit," Brown says, continuing to pet the dog. "Let's take her to the vet, huh?" he asks, looking at a slightly frowning, worried Graham.

The man nods. He doesn't say anything the entire car ride. While Will spends time at the vet clinic, Matthew manages to run to the store for groceries and returns by the end of the checkup to help carry the dog to the car. It's not until they're halfway back to the house that Graham breaks the silence.

"What do you want to name her?"

"Me?" Matthew looks up from the dog at a loss. Will nods, looking at the road, not explaining his decision in any way. Brown starts to smile, but then frowns again, and the emotion on his face changes from confusion rather quickly. They haven't yet discussed what happens in the future, after the maniac is taken out of the picture. Is this a hint that Brown can stay? Or it isn't? In this case Will apparently thinks he'll have to leave with his dog, but he doesn't want to take the animal away from Graham. But after all, if Graham keeps the dog, the one Matthew himself named, it will mean that he will be remembered in the future, even when he kicks him out... Brown finally smiles more confidently. "All right! Um... how about... Mulberry?"

Graham only nods in agreement, and Matthew continues cuddling with the dog in the backseat, looking and feeling like a kid whose parents finally let him get a dog. It's an absurd image, but Will can't help himself.

They spend the rest of the day trying to start gently introducing Mulberry to the rest of the dogs, and, to Will's delight, it goes well - only Winston seems a little sad and nervous, being the least likely to adapt quickly to the changes in his life. But it seems to Graham that everything will soon be all right - after all, Winston has accepted even Matthew. In his own way.

If Will were asked now how many dogs he has in total, he'd have trouble answering. Seven? Eight? Nine? Huh.

The days go by pretty peacefully one by one, and one evening, when he's sitting in the living room reading a book while Matthew, stroking the dog on his lap, is playing a game on his phone, Graham suddenly realizes that Brown spends almost all his time with him and has never been more than a mile away from him since his release from prison. Which has meant that he has, in fact, hardly ever gone out, only to the store with Will, that's all. For a man who loves the spaciousness, the freedom, for a hawk, this must not have been a good thing, though Brown certainly didn't complain - and he was hardly aware of his boredom. But he wasn't an introvert, unlike Will, and his thirst for socializing and visiting new places could not have evaporated, replaced entirely by an obsession (love? affection? Will was already lost in these shades) for Graham. Will bites his lip as he looks at him, and Matthew very soon feels his gaze on him, lifting his own and, judging by the sounds, losing the game because of it. Graham looks him just below the eyes, wondering. "What did you usually do in your spare time before... all that happened?" Will asks, deciding to start this conversation after all.

Brown blocks the phone, turning his gaze to the ceiling for a few moments, as if trying to remember. "What most normal people do, really. Went to clubs, bars, made some connections with people. Sometimes got into fights there - you know, violence and stuff..." he awkwardly made an indefinite gesture in the air. "Actually, it's a funny story. I think I insulted a guy, and we ended up fighting, and then he was the one who helped me with some ID's. Hmm. I don't think I should be spreading that around in a conversation with a former FBI agent..." he sort of hesitates, and then smirks nonetheless, looking at Will again. "Anyway, why are you asking this all of a sudden?"

Graham shrugs indefinitely, weighing the pros and cons in his head for a few more moments. "We could go to a bar. If you want," he voices, and Matthew's eyebrows go up to his forehead

in surprise.

He opens and then closes his mouth, clearly having trouble figuring out why Will would suggest such a thing, obviously not liking such places himself. But he decides to start his inquiries with a joke. "Are you asking me out on a date?" he asks, and Graham rolls his eyes expectantly. Matthew laughs softly. "Just kidding. But really, why would you want to go to a bar with me all of a sudden? I mean, no, not like this - you *do not want* to go to a bar with me. But you're suggesting it anyway. Why? Mr. Graham, we don't have to do something I like just because you feel you owe me something for some reason. I'm more than happy with what we have now."

Will bites his lip, looking at him with a calm gaze, not responding to his gentle smile. After about a minute of silence, he gets up from the couch. "Just pack up and let's go, for God's sake," he says, walking away toward the bedroom to change clothes.

Matthew looks after him confusedly at first, and then smiles brightly and broadly. "You like to spoil me like that, Mr. Graham, don’t you?" he asks cheerfully, getting up and following.

Will prefers not to answer or even look within himself for an answer.

There are not too many people in Matthew's chosen bar, it's hardly popular enough to attract a proper amount of visitors, but it feels fine, and Graham is well aware that his friend's choice wasn't random. And it's weird - knowing that someone cares about his comfort, even in those sorts of things.

He's been to bars in his life, of course, for all types of reasons. During his investigations, during his college days. Even as a teenager he'd sometimes run after his father or his friends to say or pass something to them. And he never particularly liked such places, not at all. First, he saw nothing pleasant about finding himself indoors with a bunch of drunken strangers. Second, for some reason, he was very often chosen as a shoulder to cry on - apparently his innocent-empathic appearance encouraged this. Even while hiding behind his glasses, he could never escape other people's attention to him, both bad and "good". He didn't like either of those things, so he tried to appear in such places as rarely as possible.

As Matthew walked in, he said hello to the bartender, who seemed to be an old acquaintance of his. He called him Charlie, and he was a grown man in his late thirties, wearing a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a blue vest, and glasses. Will looks him over cautiously, noting his tiredness and a certain nervousness that isn't caused by Brown, but by something else. Matthew turns to ask what Graham will have, but he keeps looking around and just shrugs his shoulders indifferently, so Brown gets him a whiskey and a cocktail for himself, some insane looking one with a pink straw. Taking their order, he gives the whiskey to Will, and places his free hand on his waist, but only to point in the right direction toward a more or less secluded table in the far corner of the bar. He removes his hand as soon as they walk a couple of paces, and exchanges friendly words with old acquaintances. Graham wonders if Brown here has the fame of the man who almost killed the Ripper. Surely his "friends" know all about his case, at least from the papers. But no one apparently dares to mention it - perhaps because they just don't really care.

The Man Who Didn't Kill All These People and the Man Who Almost Killed The Ripper, they sit down and Brown immediately sips a quarter of his ice-cold cocktail, looking at Will with a smile, as he continues to carefully scrutinize everything around him, just as Mulberry looked at strange dogs and unfamiliar surroundings when she entered their house a few days ago. The bartender smokes nervously, constantly casting glances toward the entrance, clearly waiting for someone. A group of working-class grown men are loudly discussing politics. A tired woman in her forties is sitting with her husband and his friends, clearly regretting having asked to go with him to this crappy place. A couple of young men are discussing something with each other rather quietly, they look like the kind of criminals who separately are safe and even fairly decent, but together they pose a threat to everyone around them. They can beat someone to death in a fit of a crowd's rage. Graham presses his lips together for a moment, but is immediately distracted by the noise of the door opening and the bartender's too loud sigh of relief.

The stranger in the coat and hat reminds him of someone, and Will frowns a little, trying to remember the image, until the right fragment comes to mind - it's FBI agent Hector Munday, who some time ago caught a serial killer, the Beast of Arkansas. They'd only met once, by chance, in Jack's office back when Will was doing his undercover work. After crossing paths with him, Graham immediately sensed something unpleasant, strange, like a chill running down the walls of his gut and lodging in his lungs. Something was wrong with Agent Munday. His dark eyes bags, his taciturnity, the way he looks at everyone around him - it's not the look of a living person, and it's not the way one looks at living people. This is a dead man walking. Will accidentally meets his gaze and immediately looks back at Matthew.

Agent Munday is a murderer.

Will doesn't care as long as it doesn't affect him.

He convinces himself of this as he sips his whiskey.

Brown arches an eyebrow, the amused smile still on his lips. Will sighs, trying to focus on his friend. "You have a lot of contacts. Too many for a man who has a hard time trusting others," he remarks.

Matthew smiles a little. "I don't trust them. And I'm sure they don't trust me. It's a different thing - we just know about each other's misdeeds and crimes, so no one is reporting anyone, because then they'd be reported to the police as well," he smiles a little, and Will frowns.

"How many other crimes were you involved in, Matthew?" he asks, and Brown chuckles.

"Nothing serious, really. No murders - except the ones you know about. A couple of shenanigans with IDs, buying guns and stuff... fought a couple of times in an underground fight club," he smiles.

"You?" Will asks with a dose of cheerfulness.

"I'm almost insulted by your tone, Mr. Graham," he jokingly places a hand on his chest, and then sips his cocktail from the straw with a smile as he continues to recount his criminal past, which, in fact, in the face of everything Will has seen in his life, seemed like childish pranks.

The man looks at him thoughtfully, holding a glass of whiskey in his hand. He is distracted from the voice by his thoughts. This formality sounds strange given the context of their current relationship, doesn't it? Not only have they kissed a few times, they live together, they share a dog, and Graham has been calling him by his first name for a long time. He wonders for about a minute whether or not to bring it up now, but finally sighs nonetheless. "You can call me Will, you know?" he offers tentatively.

Matthew smiles, then looks toward the bar. He stands up and deftly, almost feline-like, slides his hand from one Will's shoulder to the other, standing behind him and leaning into his ear, scoring him with a charming whisper: *"Oh, I know I can, Mr. Graham."* He catches his slightly confused look and winks at him with a mischievous smile, before still stepping back for another cocktail for himself and a whiskey for Will.

Graham raises an eyebrow and doesn't hold back a small smile as he looks after the man, but his gaze quickly slips from him to the FBI agent. He sits at the bar, smoking and listening to the bartender's chatter, and Will wonders if he might be wrong about this agent. Yes, his gut has never usually fooled him, and the last time he decided not to trust it and to relax around a man who clearly had something wrong with him from the very beginning, he ended up in jail. But hey, maybe...

He tries to convince himself that it's none of his business, and that he's got bigger problems, as suddenly he catches Munday's eyes on him again.

Well, it looks like he recognized him too, huh.

He notices Matthew trying to have a few words with Hector, and for some reason immediately remembers how he admired Graham for "hiding right inside the FBI" when he "committed" his murders years ago. And, though he understands perfectly well that Brown's obsession has long since rested not on his non-existent murderous nature, it still makes him feel a strange sensation, as if his lungs were itching. He stubbornly averts his gaze, looking out the window at the dark street.

"Is everything all right?" Brown asks sympathetically, sitting back down next to him, placing their glasses on the table. "You look a little nervous. We can go home if you want," he offers, but Will shakes his head, taking a whiskey and sipping.

"Trying to make a new acquaintance?" he asks instead of answering.

Matthew snorts, smiling slightly. "Just showed my splashing-over-the-top friendliness - I was interested to see who managed to make the eternal loner Charlie fall in love. But the guy is impenetrable, and he's got some kind of a cop face."

"Because he's an FBI agent," Will replies quietly, and Brown's eyes widen.

"What? Are you serious? An acquaintance of yours?" he moves a little closer to Graham curiously. "Or did you just get that from your empathy, sexy-brain?"

Profiler snorts, rolling his eyes as he continues to stare into his whiskey. "Crossed paths once a long time ago. He was visiting Baltimore, giving a lecture on profiling here. Stopped by to

ask Jack something when I was discussing with him... my work back then," he takes a sip, as if hoping to wash the unpleasant name that almost came out of his mouth with alcohol. "And-" he swallows, wondering whether or not to share his worries with Matthew. "I think he might be-"

He stops talking because he senses someone approaching them; when he looks around, he sees one of the young guys previously whispering at their table. He looks about twenty-five, muscular, and has a scar on his eyebrow, perhaps from some fight. He throws a quick glance at Matthew and then licks Will with his look. "You're that crazy guy from the Tattler Crime, aren't you?" he asks, of course already knowing the answer.

Graham tenses up, straightening, feeling annoyed and unwilling to reply. "Why? Do you want my autograph or what?" he says and takes a sip of whiskey, looking anywhere but at this man, who appears to be a little hostile. Brown continues to sit next to him, also tense, looking at the man with an attentive, icy gaze. A dog that is ready to fight for its master.

"Ha! Funny," it sounds more like an insult or a spit in the face. "Your murderous husband killed my friend. Randall Tier, remember him?" the guy asks and Will blinks, then frowns and opens his mouth to say something, but it's like a lump is stuck in his throat.

Matthew decides it's time to handle the situation. He looks at him, not getting up from his seat yet. "We're sorry for your loss, but I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it. Do you mind leaving us alone?" Brown easily uses his knowledge of good manners to avoid triggering conflict, but, judging by the look on the man's face, to no avail.

Graham is still as if he were somewhere else, his eyes fixed on nowhere. He remembers Tier, how he killed him with his own hands, how he and Hannibal dealt with the body together afterward.

"The hell I'm going to leave this guy alone. If I can't get to Lecter, at least I can get to his bitch," the man wrinkles.

Brown mentally reminds himself that he had promised Will not to kill for him. That promise just seemed incredibly difficult to keep right now, and he only hopes Will is derealized enough now not to hear those awful rude words.

Matthew stands up slowly, no smile on his lips, steel in his eyes. He looks only at the man across from him, not reacting to his slightly alarmed friend approaching them. "Listen, buddy, you look like you've had way too much alcohol. You better leave," he warns politely.

"Or else what? Who the hell are you to do anything to me?" he snorts with a sneer.

His friend looks at Brown very anxiously and then leans closer to the man, whispering something worriedly in his ear, and Matthew quickly realizes what's going on, starting to smirk. He puts his palm to his mouth, mirroring the kid's gesture. "Hey bro, let's get out of here, this guy just got out of jail, he killed a man" he says in a whisper and grins. "Yes, I did."

The man frowns at him, then pushes his friend away carelessly.

Brown smiles, but his gaze is cold and irritated. "You'd better listen to your friend, man. This ain't gonna end well for ya."

"Are you threatening me now or what?" he doesn't move away, and things start to heat up. "Ha, sure. Who else would be hanging around a serial killer besides serial killers. Letting you both out of the hospital was a mistake, you both seem to belong there."

Matthew sighs really heavily, shoving his hands into the pockets of his light-colored jacket. "Look, man, I don't really care what you say about me, but insulting my friend in front of me is not cool, okay? Why don't you take that back, apologize, and get away with it, hmm?"

"Or what? You gonna kill me?" he asks defiantly.

Brown smirks. "Hmm... yeah, just gonna find the gun... where is it..." he gropes ostentatiously through his pockets, and then sharply punches the man in the jaw with his fist.

The pain in his knuckles sends a pleasant current through his body, and he smiles cheerfully and contentedly as he looks at the guy holding onto the pain-ridden spot with his hand. The guy's eyes glisten with anger, and he strikes back abruptly, his strong fist right in his face, and now a fight begins. Will blinks as if he comes to his senses and notices the bartender calling out to them and is about to go and try to calm them down when Agent Munday stops him with an insistent gesture, silently observing the scuffle. Graham averts his gaze, focusing on how Randall's friend hits Matthew in the stomach with his knee, and he responds by smashing his nose. Brown is strong, he exercises a lot, but his figure doesn't seem all that impressive against this man, though agility certainly remains to his advantage.

Three of his friends try to stop the stranger by grabbing him by the forearms, but Brown, driven by pure anger, still raises his fist, about to punch him in the face. At this point, Will acts with absolutely no forethought: he whistles, as he usually does to stop over-excited dogs from biting each other harder than they should as a part of a normal play. Matthew reacts instantly, stopping with his fist in the air and turning back to Graham. The man himself is a bit confused by his own action, but hastily picks himself up and gets up from the table with a stony face. "Let's get out of here," he orders, pointing with a nod to the exit.

Brown breathes heavily as he stares at him, a little bloodstained and disheveled from the fight, but suddenly he smiles and, not the least bit embarrassed by several pairs of eyes staring at him, playfully shows with his palms his "dog ears" before walking over to their table and taking his cocktail. Without withdrawing his gaze from a frozen Will, he finishes the rest of his cocktail and then just nods. "Well, let's go."

Leaving the bar, Graham looks anxiously at Matthew walking slightly ahead. He doesn't know exactly how he feels about seeing him like this, so he decides to put those thoughts to rest. When they get home, however, he tells Brown to sit down, and he sits on the kitchen countertop, looking at him with a drunken (not likely alcohol; more likely adrenaline) grin as he pulls out everything he needs from the first aid kit. Graham decides not to comment on any of this.

"You're so cute, Mr. Graham," he says and hisses slightly through his teeth as Will touches his cheekbone wound with peroxide-soaked absorbent cotton. This cut isn't serious at all; a

black eye would look much worse, and the bruise around his abdomen, which is already starting to show, is also more alarming. "Should I do this more often?"

"Don't play dumb, Matthew, we both know you're not a moron," Graham says with a wrinkle, examining him critically for other injuries, noticing his shattered knuckles. He takes his palm, and freezes as the memory comes over him with goosebumps.

His face seems to look eloquent enough in this moment, because Brown frowns slightly, bowing his head, examining him carefully. "Mr. Graham? Is everything okay?" he wraps his free hand around his wrist, hinting that he needs an honest answer, not an excuse. "Oh god..." he's a little surprised at how fast Will's heart is beating. "Hey, what's wrong?" he gently wraps his palms around his face to look at him, and flinches when he sees tears accumulate in the corners of his eyes. "Oh, Mr. Graham..." he exhales worriedly, completely startled, jumping carefully off the tabletop and hugging Will, one hand holding him tightly to his waist, the other burrowing gently into his hair, letting him snuggle into his shoulder, but that only seems to push the profiler to the edge, and he begins to sob, feeling weak and unarmed before a line of memories. It's as if some moments will now forever bear a bloody imprint. Matthew, meanwhile, hugs him confusedly, stroking his hair in an attempt to comfort him. "Okay, I won't get into any more fights, I swear, Mr. Graham," he says, and a nervous chuckle comes out of Will through his tears. Brown smiles a bit. "There you go. Oh... your dogs are looking kinda weird at us. They probably think I made you cry. Now they're making plans to get me out of here in the middle of the night by the scruff of my neck like they did with my slippers two weeks ago."

Will cringes with tears, but smiles, laughing nervously again, lost through conflicting emotions as he continues to hug Brown back. He remembers Max trying to get rid of the stranger in the house piece by piece, starting with his slippers and ending with his phone, which then had to be wiped clean of drool. This distracted him and he stopped sobbing, though he didn't fully calm down.

"Good boy, there you go..." Matthew strokes his back. "How about we walk the dogs before sleep? We can do it together, or you can do it alone and I'll finish here. What do you think?"

Graham hugs him tighter, squinting, clinging to the present like a drowning man to a lifeline. He opens his eyes, abruptly, as if in a flash, realizing: *He doesn't want to risk it.* He has to do everything he can to help catch this maniac before he gets to them, because he might be stronger than them, smarter, more agile, more experienced, hell, he just might get lucky and they might not, and then this all will be over. Matthew will crash like a hawk into a tree, too eager to defend him, and his body will turn cold, his hands will stop searching for a pulse on Will’s skin, and his smile will fade, and then what will Will do? He'll be alone again, and then... then...

He pulls away, looking with tearful eyes at Brown, who smiles at him a little anxiously, at a loss for a palette of mixed emotions in his face. "I guess I don't look so godlike in your eyes anymore, do I?" Graham tries to joke, and Matthew smiles wider and softer.

"I told you we were both hawks. But that's not exactly true, you know," he strokes his hair softly, keeping his gaze on his open blue eyes. "I'm just a regular hawk. You're a god, who turns into a hawk when he needs to or when he just wants to. You may not look like a god in

the guise of a bird, but that doesn't change the fact that you remain one always, despite your appearance or circumstances."

Will chuckles. "Jesus, you're just..." he shakes his head, licking his lips salty with tears, lowering his gaze.

"Helpless?" he smiles brightly and as if even proud of himself and his feelings. Graham looks at him, and can't believe what the hell he's feeling as he looks at him. The realization is almost painful, and he has no idea what to do with it, it overflows his chest and lungs as if sprouting flowers in his body. He runs his gaze across Matthew's face, as if hoping to find the answer to all the questions buzzing in his head: when, why, how did he become so important to him, so... close? He suddenly breaks into a smile and laughs nervously, and Matthew looks at him curiously, tilting his head slightly to the side. "Mr. Graham? What's on your mind?"

Instead of answering, Will decides to move closer and cover his lips with his own, kissing him long, deep, passionately, as if trying to take all his anxieties and feelings out on him, and Matthew eagerly responds, gently clutching his strands between his fingers, pulling him even closer, though it seemed impossible. Brown could probably complain that his lips are still sore after the fight, but honestly, he doesn't care. He'd put up with any pain just to be near Will, he'd go through hell and back for him, all he needed was one word from him - or a kiss.

When he pulls away, Matthew suddenly laughs merrily. "You like to avoid answering questions, don't you? Cheeky."

"You don't like it?" Will snorts, pulling away from the embrace.

"I didn't say that," Brown remarks with a smile, looking at him contentedly, and Graham smiles softly, feeling a little flushed. He doesn't look at Matthew, and, sighing softly, nods to himself.

"I'll walk the dogs," he says, and Matthew quietly agrees, deciding to deal with the remaining wounds himself while Graham comes to his senses outside.

Standing on the porch of his house, with his hands in his pockets and while looking at the dogs, Will gradually calms down, and with that comes the realization of one frightening but necessary thing, without which they are unlikely to catch the maniac before he tries to attack them. He takes a deep breath, covering his eyes, letting this thought, spinning around in his head like a mad spiral, gradually stop, crouching sideways, bringing with it a deafening silence to his mind. The certainty that it could not be avoided grew inexorably with each turn, and Graham distinctly felt like a man climbing higher and higher in a tiny roller-coaster carriage. Here the carriage stopped at a dizzying height and froze for a moment before sliding down, mentally preparing to descend.

He exhales, opening his eyes.

He will have to see Dr. Lecter.

Chapter 7

When he wakes up in the morning, he doesn't find the usual warmth around him, and it makes Will nervous. He frowns as he sits up in bed and looks around, listening, and exhales slightly relieved only when he hears music coming from the living room and sees the 10:00 AM on the clock on the nightstand. Graham rubs his sleepy face and goes to the shower to wake up and wash off the remnants of another bad dream he had just before he woke up; once again, he was killing Matthew while Hannibal was watching him.

Something had to be done about it.

Fifteen minutes later, he comes out of the bathroom, wearing a black T-shirt and sweatpants, and heads toward the sound of music.

I need you to understand

Tried so hard to be your man

The kind of man you want in the end

Only then can I begin to live again

The dogs are asleep on their cots, some of them sleepily watching Brown, working out on the living room floor, wearing nothing but his pajama pants. His usual morning workout seems to have been going on for some time; he's a little sweaty, focused, his muscles tense, and it's like he doesn't care about the bruises on his body. Will stops in the doorway, watching him for a while, but Matthew notices him soon enough and smiles, making a few more final movements before he looks at him, getting up from the floor. Graham steps a little closer, but in a way that looks like he's just going to the fridge. "Don't you need to let your body rest after being beaten or something?" Will asks, taking from the table the glass of water Matthew must have prepared for himself, and sips it, glancing innocently at Brown, who smiles at him.

"Oh, come on, don’t act like that, you love it," without taking his eyes off him, he runs his hand over his own bare chest, entertained by the situation.

When Graham, placing the half-empty glass on the table, abruptly pulls Matthew toward him and sinks a heated kiss on his lips, Brown is lost again, his eyebrows raised and he doesn't even know where to put his hands at first. Will, however, pulls away just as sharply.

"Wait, you love it that much?" Matthew asks a little surprised, but Graham shuts him up again with a kiss, putting in it the kind of passion that seems to knock Brown off his feet, and he finally finds the strength to respond, exploring his mouth with his tongue, running his hands under the fabric of his clean t-shirt to touch his bare skin. Will digs his short fingernails into his shoulders, snuggling closer, feeling the skin begin to burn under the man's touch, and he moans softly into his kiss as their hips meet, and Matthew, pulling away from his reddened lips, watches him with the timid delight of an idolater. "Oh, shit, you want this?"

Will doesn't like to talk about his desires, and he just pulls off his black T-shirt, tossing it on the table, and Brown decides to take it as a green light. He picks him up in his arms, holding him under his hips, letting him grab onto his neck as they kiss again, and carries him toward the bedroom, closing the door behind them with his foot.

Matthew remembers the mistake he made on his first night under this roof and decides not to repeat it. Placing Graham on the bed, he begins to kiss his neck, with his free hand sliding over his seductive body. He feels his heartbeat quicken, hears Will's heavy breathing, and looks into his eyes. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life," he whispers, and continues to kiss him like a desperate believer kissing a shrine. He goes down to his chest, slides his tongue over his nipple, testing how sensitive Graham is in that place, making a mental map of all the nicest places. He pulls his pants down along with his underwear, tossing them aside in the laundry basket, and moves down even lower, stroking his knees barely perceptibly with his fingertips and tracing his lips against his thighs. Will makes a quiet sound, biting his lips immediately, and Matthew throws his head up, looking with eager awe into his face. "Don't be shy, Mr. Graham. Give me the pleasure of hearing your pleasure," he winks and, keeping his gaze fixed on him, slides his tongue from his thigh higher to his groin, and Will shudders with his whole body. Brown licks his lips, wetting them with saliva, before he turns his determined, molten gaze to Graham's dick.

He savors the moment, and then leans closer with a smirk and circles the tip with his tongue, holding Will's reflexively twitching hips and feeling a wave of goosebumps run down his spine at the sound that escapes from the man's lips. Matthew can no longer contain himself and opens his mouth, taking in half of his hard dick at once, inhaling Will's scent mixed with their shared shower gel.

Graham squeezed the sheets with his fingers, squinting at the emotions that were overwhelming him - he was always open during sex, and his empathy made him feel his partner's pleasure (or displeasure), and it was always too much for him, but now... the intensity of arousal and adoration and love radiating from the man sucking his cock was off the scale, and he could not hold back a real, unmuffled groan of total pleasure.

As soon as it reaches Brown's ears, the man almost rolls his eyes at the shooting pleasure in his groin, and mumbles encouragingly with his dick in his mouth. He pulls away only briefly, breathing deeply. "Fuck, you're perfect, I've never felt so close to God as I do right now," an amused chuckle escapes his lips, and then he swallows Will's dick again, even more than he did before, starting to move his head, trying to do his best to satisfy him, and his best reward is the quiet moans escaping Graham's mouth, unrestrained and sincere. Brown's lips are a little sore from the yesterday’s fight, but the pain pales in comparison to the pleasure, and even spurs it on - he was defending his god's honor, after all, wasn't he? Quite worthy of the scars.

Will almost gasps with pleasure, his toes clenching, he feels very close. "Matthew-"

Whatever he wanted to say, he couldn't, choking back a moan as he meets Brown's gaze. He closes his eyes tightly, tilting his head back, continuing to clutch the sheets with one hand and lowering the other, burrowing into the man's hair, smoothing one strand behind his ear, making him moan right with his cock in his mouth. And it's way too much now. His heart

pounding in his chest at a frantic pace, he chokes out a moan, clutching the man's hair, and cums, opening his mouth in an initially mute moan, which ends with a pitiful sound on the exhale as he feels Matthew swallow every last drop, only then releasing his dick from the hot captivity of his mouth.

Brown finds himself back at the level of his neck, showering it with kisses, feeling himself on the edge of a depthless abyss of pleasure. He continues to mindlessly whisper words of praise, like prayers, and he appears to Will so impossibly supple, so tender that it reverberates with pain in his heart. "Oh, God... God, I'm sorry, please wait just a little bit longer, I almost..." sounds so unaccustomedly pitiful, and Graham, still covered in post-orgasmic bliss like with a warm blanket, reaches up to his face, stroking his so sensitive ears and the places behind them gently with his fingertips, and an almost surprised moan escapes Matthew as he cums, shuddering his whole body.

He freezes and then exhales loudly, relaxing as he lies down beside him, throwing his arm and leg over Will, resting his head on his chest, listening to his gradually calming heartbeat. Will keeps stroking his hair, at times gently touching his ear, making Brown smile.

He sighs heavily after a while.

"I have to see Hannibal," Graham says calmly.

Matthew freezes, even stops breathing for a few moments, and then raises his head, looking at Will with an arched eyebrow. "No way, I can't be *that* bad" he says with a serious face, and Graham can't stand it, starting to laugh, grabbing the pillow next to him to playfully hit Brown with it, and he starts smiling too, dodging the blow and lying down now facing Will, placing his palm on his chest. "No, really, where did that thought come from all of a sudden? I mean, you don't even want to think about him, do you?" he tilts his head sideways curiously.

"Yes, I don't," Graham sighs, staring up at the ceiling. "But it has to be done. Because I'm not sure about my lead about a former colleague from the hospital - that was just a shot in the dark. It'll be easier to talk to him, he'll tell me everything, and then..."

He doesn't finish, not knowing how to explain in words the picture of the future he sees. Matthew looks at his sunlit profile with interest. "What's on your mind, Mr. Graham?" he asks and with his free hand nudges Will to turn his head and look at him. The man's heartbeat under his palm quickens, and Brown frowns a little, trying to figure out what that might mean, why Will is so nervous. "Mr. Graham-"

He is interrupted by the phone ringing, and Will averts his gaze and reaches for the nightstand to pick it up. Matthew sighs heavily and lies on his back, staring thoughtfully at the mystery man beside him, missing most of the conversation, catching only that Jack was on the line, and that they'll be waiting for Will at the hospital in a couple of hours. Brown turns his head, looking at the watch, figuring that if they want to be on time, they need to go get breakfast and get dressed right now.

"Matthew," Graham says, catching his attention, and the man looks at him again, not holding back a warm smile. Naked, disheveled Will Graham, only now and only for him. Brown feels

a wave of warmth radiating through his whole body from top to toe. Will, on the other hand, swallows awkwardly as he begins to dress, sitting on the edge of the bed. It's as if he's trying to find the words and dare to say something. "Would you... um... like to go fishing with me one day? When it gets warmer..." he says uncertainly, and Matthew raises his eyebrows, gradually understanding his words, and then a wide smile appears on his face, and he sits down abruptly behind Graham, hugging him around the waist, pulling him closer to him, not letting him put his sock on in peace, and kisses his neck.

"Anything," he breaks into a kiss, "you," another, "wish" a kiss is longer and at the very jaw, but not a strong one so as not to accidentally put a hickey - not a brand, but the gentle touch of a lover. "You can't even imagine how glad I am to hear that. I'll be quiet so I don't scare your fish away, and I'll just watch you like a hawk. Or maybe you could even teach me how to fish. That'd be cool, I *love* trying new things," he chatters, already stepping away and starting to pick up his clothes from the closet, passing the towel they wiped themselves with and tossing it in the laundry basket. "Oh, I'm not likely to have time to make a proper breakfast - or lunch, I don't know what the hell to call it at noon - so why don't we stop somewhere on the way to get something to eat? Ooh, I'm starving for a McDonald's burger and fries. Doesn't that sound like a fucking dream? " he looks over his shoulder, putting on a white T-shirt and catching Will staring, and smiles at the blushing man, who immediately averts his gaze and keeps putting on his pants.

Matthew glows with happiness as they drive in the car, listening to his playlist. They snack on fast food right in the parking lot, and Brown noisily sucks his green tea through a straw while Will eats his fries, staring thoughtfully ahead of him. The closer they were to their destination, the darker Graham became, mentally preparing himself for the fateful encounter more than a year after seeing Lecter in court. At one point he even gets the idea of just turning around and, without explaining anything to Jack, driving back to the Wolf Trap and not leaving the house until everything settles itself - but he does not, of course, and soon finds himself outside the hospital building.

Brown, seeing and sensing his anxiety, puts a hand on his hip and, catching his gaze, smiles supportively. "You still can say no. It'll be okay, I'll take care of everything." Will looks at him silently, then opens the door and still gets out of the car, and Matthew sighs. "What, not even gonna kiss me?" he asks, leaning over to the side of the driver's seat, resting his outstretched arm against it. Graham freezes, looking at him. "Come on, for luck," Brown urges him, and Will sighs, walking back to the car and leaning in, and Matthew immediately wraps his palm around his head, digging his fingers into his hair, suddenly deepening the kiss, making it slow, gentle, as if trying to convey his calmness and confidence through this intimate touch of his lips.

When he lets him go, Will looks up at him, at his smile, and licks his lips, swallowing, fixing his hair. "I hope it won't take long," he says and walks away, feeling strange. He cringes uncomfortably at his thoughts as he makes his way into the building.

...A long beep. The door opens. He takes a few steps forward, looking to the other end of the room he enters, scrolling in his head through the instructions the nurse has voiced to him. The

pace of his stride is calm, which cannot be said for the pace of his heartbeat, but he doesn't give himself away in any way, his face remaining stony and only slightly tense. He doesn't flinch when he sees Hannibal standing expectantly behind the thick glass, and he's very grateful to himself for that.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter," he sets distance with this phrase, stopping five paces from the glass.

"Hello, Will," he says as if they were old friends.

Will doesn't react.

"You know why I'm here," he asserts, seeing no point in asking. "And I think we're both motivated for you to help the FBI find this man before he makes a mistake."

"A mistake?" Hannibal clarifies.

"Oh, don't act like that, Dr. Lecter," the man wrinkles, relaxing a little, feeling more confident thanks to the fact that he hasn't started crying at the mere sight of his past. He paces calmly around the room, examining his surroundings, not focusing on the man in the prison suit only. He uses his empathy so as not to be too emotional right now. "You and I both know he misunderstood you. You don't want him to do this to me," Will says confidently, stopping his gaze on the fake fireplace behind Hannibal. "I can't even imagine the disappointment that would befall you if I were to die by any hand but yours, Dr. Lecter," he still looks him in the eye with a cheeky challenge.

"Are we no longer on a first-name basis?" Hannibal goes off topic, but Will was ready for that.

"I'm more comfortable the less personal we are," he responds discreetly, looking him in the eye.

A soft smirk appears on Lecter's face, and then he looks away and does something that makes Will freeze: he sniffs. He picks up something, and his face takes on a pensive look, as if he's trying to figure out if he's mistaken. But he knows he can’t be mistaken. "I smell notes of the distant past. It's very unusual to feel it without the background smell of chlorine and my own blood... I have to admit, it's a little unexpected, Will," he looks directly at him, and Graham tenses up. "You've always had a unique ability to surprise me. Tell me, did you mean to surprise me with this today, or did you do it unconsciously?"

Will maintains a stony, unemotional face. "I probably should have poured the bottle of perfume Alana offered me before coming in here. My bad."

Hannibal smiles a little. His dark eyes peer into his blue ones. "How is Mr. Brown?"

"He's fine, thank you," politeness bordering on rudeness. "So will you tell me who your copycat is?" Will asks impatiently.

"Be kind to me, Will, satisfy my curiosity first and maybe I'll satisfy yours," Lecter smiles with just the corners of his lips. "I don't know much about Mr. Brown beyond the obvious,

but he seems to be an avid fan of yours? Was willing to kill for you, and almost took my life. But tell me, Will, aren't you afraid that his unhealthy obsession will end badly for you?"

Graham can't stand it and chuckles, not taking his eyes off his face. "What is this, a therapy session, Dr. Lecter?" he arches an eyebrow ironically. "I'm fine, and that's all you deserve to know after what you did to me."

"What did I do to you?"

"Dr. Lecter, who is your copycat?"

Hannibal tilts his head sideways with a smile, as if jokingly noting Will's impatience. "There are many factors that influence our choice of mate. In primitive societies, the needs of physical comfort and safety are sufficient for marriage - the partner provides the food that keeps the family from starving, provides shelter over their heads, and fends off enemies. More complex unions, however, involve the satisfaction of other needs as well - the need for belonging and love, for respect and esteem. Next come the cognitive, aesthetic needs. The need for self-actualization, for becoming oneself, for self-acceptance, for self-knowledge," he keeps his eyes on Graham. "The more needs are fulfilled in a marriage, the happier it is. And the best unions, of course, are between equals. Can an immortal god be happy with a mere mortal?"

Will snorts. "Well, of course you think you're a god."

"And so do you."

They look at each other in silence. Hannibal waits for Will to get the full meaning of his words.

"Dr. Lecter, what do you want from me?" Graham asks, tilting his head sideways. "You want something from me, don't you? I think we'd both feel better if you asked for it directly. I'm here. I'm listening to you. What do you want, *Hannibal?*" he steps closer to the glass, right in front of his old friend.

"A therapy session for you, nothing else - I think you need it more than anything right now, given all the circumstances," Lecter says calmly, suddenly stepping back to sit in his chair and glancing again at Will, who had raised his eyebrows a little amazed, and pointing him to a chair near the wall. "Yours isn't nailed to the floor, you can take it and put it closer, please."

Graham presses his lips together, staring at him for a long minute in total silence, but then still exhales quietly and goes to get the chair, which, adding to the absurdity of the whole situation, was worse and much more uncomfortable than the one Hannibal was sitting in. Alana is spoiling him so that she can have leverage if anything happens. And who said about physical comfort and security? If Hannibal really was trying to imply that he was the only one who could meet all of Will's needs, he clearly didn't choose the best entourage to do this.

Will sits down and looks up, and his imagination throws him the old memorable image of Lecter's living room, the two comfortable chairs, the warm light of the fireplace. He sighs, leaning back and looking at Hannibal with lazy interest.

"Therapy is never a waste of time. It helps us build a dialogue with our inner beast and the outside world," Lecter finally breaks the silence, and Will says nothing to that, not considering it necessary, so Hannibal decides to get to the point. "Why him?" he asks in a casual, calm tone.

Graham arches an eyebrow, looking at him silently for another couple of moments. "Are you jealous, Dr. Lecter? *"Why him, why not me?"*" he jokes, though, not bothering to wait for an answer, knowing it perfectly well. "I don't know what answer you want to hear."

"Is it important to you what kind of answer I want to hear?"

Will almost rolls his eyes, but holds back. He doesn't want to talk to Hannibal about it, afraid he'll stain the good things he has in his life now with blood. "Because I feel good with him."

"That's pretty vague," Lecter notes.

"That's enough for me," he shrugs. "Everything is clear and fair with him. He understands me, I understand him. He doesn't lie to me, I don't lie to him," he emphasizes the last sentence with an intonation on purpose. "It feels... normal."

"He was killing for you."

"My understanding of normal has long since worn out and stretched like an old T-shirt," Will says. "I guess as long as he doesn't feed me with the remains of his victims, I'm fine."

Hannibal shrugs as if he wasn't hurt by those words. "Of course he doesn't. He's a terrible cook, apparently, since you're snacking on fast food."

Will burst out laughing at the unexpectedness of this phrase, oozing with jealousy from every crevice between the words. "If you want to look better than him in my eyes, Hannibal, cooking is clearly not something to be considered a trump card. You fed me human meat without my consent."

"And you've always been fed and satisfied, haven't you? You've lost weight since we last met, Will."

Now Will actually laughs, leaning forward in his chair. "Is this a therapy session or a conversation between two exes? Hannibal..." Graham is getting in the mood, feeling a subtle note of satisfaction at the realization that he's causing the man's jealousy; he's curious if it feels like a knife in his stomach or a saw cutting through his skull. He licks his lips, wondering which pain point he can squeeze. "You might think he's pathetic, some kind of inferior predator that would be good for a meat pie or some other shit with a name I have no idea how to pronounce, but Matthew is not what you think. And I'm... really grateful to him. His love..." an appropriate thought finally pops into his head, and he holds back a smile. *"His love is practically gift-wrapped. It's like he had to show me the **positive** so that I could see the **negative**".*

He doesn't take his eyes off Hannibal for a single moment, and the predatory spark that appears in his features, which is quite soon replaced by mild admiration, doesn't escape his

attention.

He had always had a weakness for Will's rudeness and insolence. It's his Achilles' heel.

Unfortunately for Will, there were two people who could play this game. "Is it really that simple, positive and negative? If you recall, I used to kill and eat people, and so did Hobbs. I used the people around me like you use your Matthew now."

"Oh," Will raises his eyebrows, feeling amused. *"Is that what I'm doing?"*

They exchange smiles and meaningful silences. "Tell me, Will, don't you think Matthew may be the copycat you're looking for? Deceiving you just to stay around while you don't see the truth, don't hear the truth, and don't tell the truth."

Graham looks at him, shaking his head, beginning to feel the very power that smoldered in his hands years ago, from the moment he killed Tier to the instant Hannibal smelled Freddie Lounds's scent on him. "I know he's not the copycat, Hannibal. That trick won't work on me, don't waste our time."

"How can you be so sure?" Lecter asks with calm curiosity. Will wants to throw a chair at him, just to make him surprised.

"Hannibal, he has a ***very*** good alibi for all the murders," he lets those words hang in the air between them with an opaque hint.

The spark of realization that flashed in Lecter's dark eyes could have started a wildfire or burned the whole of Pompeii to the ground. "You are his alibi," his voice is as calm as always. "You live under one roof with a murderer."

"He lives under one roof with a murderer too, Hannibal."

Dr. Lecter smiles contentedly at these words, continuing to peer inquisitively into Graham's face, examining him like watching a butterfly under a microscope. "In that case, I don't think two killers would have a problem dealing with a third on their own ground," Hannibal remarks, and in Will's imagination, he raises a glass of white wine to his lips and takes a sip.

"I'm in no position to take risks," Will lets himself breathe out tiredly.

"Interesting. You don’t want to risk yourself or him?" Lecter asks curiously. "Or the illusion of normality you so desperately cling to just to get away from your own self?" is a question Graham decides not to answer. "Tell me, Will, are you really willing to cut off a part of yourself just to live a normal life?"

"There's no need to cut anything off, Hannibal," he says. "I'm evolving to not have that part of myself. It's slow, but less painful and more effective. Chop off one Hydra's head, two new ones grow. I've learned it by bitter experience."

"As we evolve, so does everyone else around us," Lecter remarks. "You hesitate, and you become displaced from the pages of history, like the Neanderthals in their time," he says in

the tone of gentle warning, the way Will's father once asked him not to cross the road at a red light or not to go swimming when the wind was too strong.

"Maybe I'm a herbivore. Maybe I'm not a predator, and I survive as a kind not by my danger, but by my ability to see danger."

"A herbivore? With these fangs?" Hannibal grins cheerfully and shakes his head. "Oh, Will. Life without me makes you soft. And answering your question, I don't see any real reason to be jealous. Your infatuation with Matthew is temporary, it will pass, and I'm not used to being jealous of something that has such a short shelf life."

Returning to the subject of Matthew makes Graham tense up a little. He is silent, looking at Lecter with a little frown, and then he gets a hunch. "You're not going to help me. You want the copycat to kill him."

"Not at all," Lecter smiles calmly. "I just want to see what he's capable of, your admirer. Whose do you think will win, mine or yours?" he finds this situation frankly hilarious. Will does not.

Will gets up from his chair irritably, and his imagination stops painting the deceptively cozy contours of the familiar room around him. "Hannibal, we had an agreement. I satisfy your curiosity, and you tell me who the copycat is. You always seemed to brag about keeping your word."

"I'm afraid I've given you plenty of hints - it's not my fault you haven't been able to interpret them yet," Hannibal remarks, and Will frowns. "You didn't think I'd give you his name, did you, Will? What fun would it be?" he smiles and, picking up his pencil, lowers his gaze to the drawing, continuing to trace the outline of Graham's figure, his beautiful face, expressive eyes, and sensuous lips, on the snow-white paper.

Will opens his mouth slightly, trying to find something to tell him. *"Fun?"* he wrinkles, overwhelmed by a broth of different feelings. "Well… We'll see what you think of your fun when you look at the picture of my corpse in your favorite newspaper, Hannibal," he spits out, turning sharply and walking toward the exit, brimming with anger.

"Do you remember the legend of Paris' love for Helen of Troy?" Hannibal suddenly asks in a deceptively calm voice, stopping to move his pencil across the paper, and Graham has to stop. He does not, however, turn to face him, not wanting to look at him now. "Paris was promised the most beautiful woman in the world, but she was already married to Menelaus, the Spartan king. That didn't stop him and he went to Sparta to take Helen to Troy - thanks to Aphrodite's charms, which no mortal can resist, she made her fall in love with Paris and run away with him. All this led to the Trojan War, in which Paris himself did not take an active part at first, and his own brother Hector, Homer's favorite hero, the one who later killed Patroclus, and then was killed by Achilles, had to induce him to enter the battle. In the end, Paris was fatally wounded by a poisoned arrow and died, and Helen, alive and unharmed, was found by Menelaus, who thought at first to kill her for her betrayal, but still softened at the sight of her beauty," he smiles a little dreamily, and Will senses it in his voice. "It's astonishing what the mere beauty of others can do to us. It softens the heart and soothes the beasts. It captivates men and gods, making them fight each other."

Graham wants to kill him with his own hands right now.

He exhales, covering his eyes.

"Goodbye, Dr. Lecter."

"See you soon, Will."

Chapter 8

Matthew stood outside the hospital, hesitant to go inside, watching the guards who used to have that unpleasant power over him that often corrupts people and encourages them to be worse than they are. Now they didn't even approach him, they weren't interested - they had their own problems, their own responsibilities. Brown bites his lips a little nervously, checking the time on his phone every couple of minutes, and in his head uncomfortable thoughts, fears, and doubts climb out of the cracks in the floor of his mind. He is scowling and serious, not quite the same as he always is around Will; looking at him like that, one would assume that he must be a violent and rude man, capable of fighting with anyone or even threatening them with a gun. A bruise around his eye, and a busted lip add extra points to this unaccustomed image. He keeps his hands in the pockets of his light-colored jacket, and wrinkles slightly in pain as he moves his fingers. He immediately remembers last night's fight, and along with that memory carriage comes an intrusive tempting idea of how good it would be to punch the Ripper in the face. Just for what he did to Will and for what he keeps doing to him. He deserved it, damn it.

"You look like you're at a funeral," a familiar voice sounds, and Brown frowns, turning in its direction and seeing Jack. He must have been staring at him for some time, standing a little to the side in his black coat and hat. After his words, he walks slowly toward Brown, and Matthew keeps his gaze on him, radiating with all his soul a message accessible and understandable to even a complete idiot: **Danger - high voltage.**

"Is Mr. Graham still with Dr. Lecter?" Matthew asks, not even flinching, remaining in his place as Crawford stands beside him.

"I'm afraid so," Jack replies calmly. "And you just got out and you're already getting into some trouble again?" he changes the subject, and, explaining his words, gestures to the man's battered face.

Brown snorts, looking away as if interested in the movers unloading the medicine, and leaves Crawford's question unanswered, wondering if Will felt around him the way he does now: as if he were a delinquent schoolboy summoned to the principal's office. Even if you haven't done anything wrong, you still start to feel guilty around Jack and try to find possible sins in your recent past that he would like to tell you off for.

"What do you want from Will, Matthew?" Crawford asks once he doesn't get an answer. "What do you need him for?"

The man snorts, looking at Jack again with a shadowy chuckle on his face and a dangerous steel in his gaze. "Would you believe me if I told you that I love him and want only the best for him?" he asks, and, seeing the skepticism on the agent's face, looks away again. "That's what I thought. You know, just the fact that you come to Mr. Graham only when you need something from him doesn't mean that everyone else feels that way about him too. I just want to be there for him," he explains a little irritably, wrinkling his nose either from the cool breeze that's blowing in or from this tense conversation.

"Why is Will letting you do this?" Crawford asks in a calm tone.

Matthew chuckles a little nervously. "I don't know, ask him," he says. "Though you'd better not - he won't like you prying into his private affairs again, and you'll only end up pissing each other off," Brown rushes to add. "Just understand that Mr. Graham doesn't need your custody, and, I don't know, trust him or something. I know it would be a new thing for you, but why not give it a try, huh?" he quips, shivering with cold.

Jack looks at him silently for about a minute, figuring something out for himself but not voicing his conclusions, and then suddenly he turns toward the entrance to the hospital. "Let's go inside, or you'll freeze to death while they talk," he says, patting him on the shoulder almost fatherly, but Matthew shrieks in pain from an old bullet wound. Crawford looks at him somewhat confused, and Brown frowns, rubbing the sore spot. "Sorry, didn't think of that. Let's go," Jack says politely.

Brown wrinkles his nose, reluctantly following him.

This is the third "form" in which he's visiting this place. First he was an orderly, then a patient, and now a visitor. And each time, everything around him changed in his perception depending on his role. He looks at the same walls, the same people, workers, patients, but he sees them differently. Even the air feels different. He is like a hawk that has flown into the house where he was once caged, but now he has the opportunity to fly around the place and see familiar surroundings from a different angle.

Jack opens the door of Alana Bloom's office and Matthew only crosses the threshold behind him to realize what it all means.

He looks calmly at the doctor. "Hello, Dr. Bloom," he says, remembering those couple of conversations they had, and especially the last one - when she incredulously made the decision to declare Brown sane and free. It seems to him that she only agreed to it because he tried to kill Hannibal once. Not as a thank you, but simply because she perceived him as part of her circle, all members of which were listed in a book with a title like "Direct and Indirect Victims of the Ripper," volume five, page ten, line fourteen. He smirks faintly at this thought.

"Hello, Matthew," she says in a soft, doctorly tone, looking at him as he wanders around the room, peering at the interior, which just over a month ago he could only see sitting in his chair. Now it's as if he's been kept on a way longer leash. "Rumor has it you're settled in Wolf Trap."

Brown smirks, stopping by the window and turning to her. He stares at her for a few moments. "I love spicy rumors. They've helped us to survive during the process of evolution. Rumor has it that there is an enemy tribe on the other side of the forest. Rumor has it that these berries are poisonous. Rumor has it that Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper," he runs his fingers over the bookshelf, glancing over the spines, then darts a knowing glance at her, walking back to the middle of the room, shoving his hands into pockets.

Alana doesn't react to the obvious jab at her and Jack's side. "About a month out, and you're already showing a penchant for violence again, Matthew?" she changes the subject.

He snorts. "It was noble violence. I was defending Mr. Graham's honor like a gentleman," he curtsies jokingly with a wave of his hand, and a smirk touches his lips, but not for long. Brown sighs. "Was it your idea to bring me here?"

"What makes you think so?" she asks calmly, unwavering, elegant as a cat.

"It's a very interesting move to put me in a room with two different people for whom I've made up a very different image before. Soon a third will come along as well, and that's when the party starts for sure" he walks over to her desk, to the Newton's cradle, taking one ball and letting it go, watching them move. "You evaluate me. My danger to Mr. Graham, to be exact. I very much appreciate your concern, but your overprotective attitude is terribly annoying. And so does your duplicity. You take advantage of Mr. Graham - Jack always has, about you of course I can't say for sure anymore, but you indulge him. I don't know how you managed to influence Mr. Graham, arousing his conscience and compassion for all living beings, to agree to this, but it's just unspeakably mindless, Dr. Bloom!" Brown stops next to her chair, and she looks up at him calmly and sternly. "You use him to get out of Dr. Lecter the information you want. Like when you want a dog to let your glasses case out of its teeth, and so you wave a piece of meat in front of its face, hoping that you can manage to both make it drop the case and have enough time to pull back your hand with the meat. But five times out of ten the dog still gets the meat, just because it's faster than we are".

Alana remains calm, her red lips not even flinching until she begins to speak. "We didn't talk him into it. I was against it, and I still am. Will told me that no one persuaded him to come here – for some unknown reason he himself decided it was a necessity" she looks at him with steadfastness and conviction, and he knows she's not lying. "Will walked up to the rabid dog and held out his hand as its favorite kind of meat, hoping that he would escape in time when the dog opened its mouth."

Matthew looks at her, realizing her words. He bites the inside of his cheek, frowning slightly, and then licks his lips, sighing. "Well, maybe he really can do it. I believe he can do anything - why wouldn't he be good at this as well?" he reassures himself, rather than anyone else, walking back to the chair in the corner of the room and sitting there, leaning back and throwing his head back, covering his eyes and sighing heavily again, silent for another minute or so. "God, why is it taking so long?" he groans anguishedly, covering his face with palms. He's almost ready to howl, like Winston does when it takes Will too long to get back from fishing.

At that moment he hears the sound of the door opening and turns his head, still covering most of his face with his cold palms.

Graham looks inside the room, first seeing Jack and then Matthew and Alana. He frowns slightly and looks more like a dead man or a ghost wandering through a cemetery at night. Brown immediately straightens up in his chair, looking at Will in anxious expectation, studying him, trying to understand something about what happened between him and Hannibal. Finally Graham closes the door behind him, lowering his gaze, licking his lips, trying to gather his thoughts. "He didn't give me the name," he says, and Jack sighs. "He said he left hints in the dialog we had with him, but, to be honest, I'm not sure that's really the case."

"I thought Hannibal doesn't want you to die at the hands of this copycat," Alana remarks, frowning slightly.

Will smiles crookedly, not straying far from the door, hoping to get away sooner. "He's sure I'll be fine," he sighs, resigning himself to the inevitability of answering questions after all, and walks over to the window.

"How are you, Will?" Bloom asks, and Matthew feels like she really cares. Good.

Graham wrinkles his nose, looking outside, most likely to avoid looking at anyone in the room. "I wish I had accepted your offer to bathe in perfume. I would have saved myself a lot of nerves..." he replies and Alana blinks, shifting her gaze to Brown, who doesn't quite know what this is all about and frowns slightly, watching everyone in the room carefully.

"You think he didn't say anything useful at all?" Crawford clarifies.

"Oh, no, he probably said something that could be realized as a clue post factum, no doubts. The problem is, I can't see it now" Will sighs nervously, and Matthew stifles the urge to go over to him and take his hands in his and tell him how good he is for at least trying this, for getting through it and coming back from the monster's cage alive - though it was too early to say so. Brown gazed into him in a desperate attempt to see if anything had changed in Will, if a new monstrous scar had appeared on the walls of his mind. But it was a riddle.

"Okay. What were you two talking about?" Jack asks, hoping that at least something can come out of this.

Will sighs. "About Maslow's pyramid, about gods, therapy... Paris and Helen," he collides his gaze with Matthew's, and it takes Brown's breath away, but that eye contact only lasts a couple of moments.

Graham walks leisurely over to Alana's desk, still frowning, immersed in his own thoughts, and reaches over to the Newton's cradle, pulling back one of the balls and making it hit the other, setting everything in motion. Matthew raises his eyebrows slightly and is not surprised when he feels two pairs of eyes on him.

Coughing, he gets up from his chair and adjusts his jacket. He calmly walks closer to Graham and gently stops the balls with his fingers - he remembers that he did it himself because he was nervous and now he wanted to distract Will from this feeling. He looks up, looking at him a little awkwardly and somewhat guiltily, and Brown, keeping his gaze on his face, licks his lips and clenches and unclenches his hand, trying to get rid of the ticklish urge to touch Will right now, despite Alana and Jack presence in the room. Graham, lowering his gaze, notices it, and swallows, but doesn't step back or pull away. "I'll tell you if I can figure out what he meant, Jack. But right now I really just want to go home."

Matthew, like a smart dog, reacts to the word "home" instantly, heading confidently toward the exit, not saying goodbye to anyone, not interested in anyone but Will - who Alana asks to stay a little longer when Brown is already out the door, holding it for Graham, and the man rolls his eyes, perfectly aware that they want to talk in private with Will about him. He looks

expectantly at the man, and then, when he nods, closes the door after all, standing outside, waiting for him, arms crossed over his chest and leaning against the wall.

As he waits, he sees the orderly walking down the hall - the one who once hit him, leaving a scar on his nose - and smirks, catching his gaze. He waves his palm at the man, but he hurries to turn away with a frightened look. Not so brave when his opponent isn't handcuffed, it seems.

When Graham finally walks out of the office after what seemed like an eternity to Brown, he looks a little confused, and Matthew glances at him with interest, smiling as they meet each other's gazes. "My ears are burning. What did she say?" he tilts his head sideways.

Will shrugs uncertainly and licks his lips, looking away. "She said... she's happy for me," he says it as if he can't believe it himself.

Brown raises his eyebrows and smiles brightly. "Really? I must have left a good impression," he puffs his chest out smugly, walking beside Will down the hallway toward the exit.

"Seriously, what did you say to them?" Graham is clearly greatly bemused.

Matthew shrugs. "I have no idea, but nothing that you don't already know," he says and then frowns slightly puzzled. "Speaking of incomprehensible. What was that phrase about perfume?" Brown asks, opening the door to the street for him and looking at him curiously.

Will opens his mouth, but then closes it, giving himself more time to think, to formulate a sentence. He licks his lips, then still says grudgingly, "Hannibal... has a particularly advanced sense of smell," he looks away, still frowning slightly. *"He smelled you on me,"* he explains after all.

"Oh," Matthew raises his eyebrows in surprise. "Oh... Oh!" his eyes widen as he realizes the meaning of his words, and then he realizes something else as well and smirks, remembering this morning. "Ooohhh... So he knows we're a thing? Is he jealous?" he is clearly far more smug than Will would like, and the man sighs.

"He's awfully jealous. That's why he hasn't told me anything - he hopes his admirer will kill mine," he says, looking Matthew in the eye, but Brown isn't upset or frightened by his words in any way; he's still smirking, and besides, he takes him gently by the wrist, stroking it gently with his fingertips.

"Don't worry, Mr. Graham," he smiles warmly. "I'm not going to let anyone kill any of us. I still want to go fishing with you in the spring... and Mulberry will miss me. I can't just leave her."

His heartbeat gradually calms down, and Will sighs heavily, averting his gaze, unable to look into his amorous eyes without being able to respond to his bewildering feelings with at least a kiss.

Suddenly he frowns and Brown feels his heartbeat quicken again under his fingers. "Shit," Graham swears under his breath, and Matthew turns, looking in the same direction as him

and noticing a familiar curly redhead peering out of the parking lot with a camera in her hands. The girl appears to have already taken a photo, and looks at them puzzled over the camera. "And I thought this day couldn't get any worse," he wrinkles, letting go of Brown's hand. The man looks tensely at him, then back at Freddie, and finally heads confidently in her direction, smiling fakely. "Matthew?" Will calls out to him confusedly.

Lounds stays where she is, smugly, her chin up, realizing there's nothing they can do to her right outside the hospital for criminals. "Mr. Brown. The Man Who Almost Killed the Ripper. Almost is a very important word, isn't it?" she tilts her red head sideways. "Perhaps you'd like to share with me your thoughts on the matter? Or would you rather tell me about how you became Will Graham's lover? There must be quite a curious story to tell, am I right? I can almost see the headline - "Couldn't Take His Life, But Could Take His Husband". Funny?"

"Funny," Matthew nods with a smirk. "Delete the photo, Freddie."

"The one where you two are holding hands like some sweet teenage couple?" Lounds asks. "Why would I do that?"

"Mr. Graham didn't like that you took it. And I didn't like that you upset him," says Brown calmly.

"Oh, how cute," she smiles. "Maybe I'll think about it if you tell me how it happened that you walk out of the hospital, where Hannibal Lecter is being held, holding Will Graham's hand?" Freddie arches one eyebrow.

"So you can write an article about it? I wasn't born yesterday, Freddie."

"Too bad," she shrugs, about to put the camera away, when suddenly Brown grabs her wrist abruptly.

"I really don't like it when someone makes him upset, Miss Lounds," Matthew says, leaning toward her, a threatening note ringing in his voice and glinting in his eyes. Her pulse quickens, but she continues to look almost indifferent - this isn't her first face-to-face encounter with the killer after all.

"What does Dr. Lecter think of all this?" even beside the beast, Freddie continues to provoke him to bite. "From the outside it looks like you've come to ask him for a blessing."

Brown grits his teeth, squeezing her wrist harder, watching as she purses her lips in pain and casts nervous glances over his shoulder. "I don't need anything from Hannibal but to leave Mr. Graham alone. And I need the same from you."

"Hardly any of us would agree to that," Lounds remarks defiantly.

"Matthew!" Will's voice sounds quite close, preventing him from replying, and the next moment Brown feels his hand on his shoulder, and looks back, eyeing Graham. He looks like a stern owner whose dog has gone off leash and tried to attack a passerby. Matthew finds himself helpless before his gaze, and lets go of Freddie's hand obediently.

She presses the camera closer to her and smiles as she looks at Graham. "Hello, Will. You haven't learned your lesson, have you? Or do you just like this so much? Can't live without a psychopath like you around. It takes one to love one."

"You're a psychopath as much as we are. And I don't want to talk to you, Freddie," Will says with impatient irritation. "And you won't talk to her ever again either," he tells Matthew, and the latter nods slightly, looking at him like he's the messiah.

"Oh, and how many commands does he know already?" Freddie smirks. "I bet his favorite is fass," she says, and Will, deciding to end this circus, turns around, and Matthew obediently follows. "Be careful with your pup, Will," the girl says after them. "He might bite someone, and then he'll be locked in a cage again."

They approach their car, and Matthew opens the door for him.

"Or is that just your way of getting rid of exes?" Lounds asks with a challenge, and manages to catch the angry look in his green eyes before Brown gets in the car, swallowing all the barbs he could have responded with, and holding back the urge to get out and shoot her ginger head right now.

He does not let this happen.

After all, he really is good at obeying commands.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Graham comes out of the shower in the evening, dressed in his underwear and a T-shirt, he sees Matthew sitting on the bed, reading something frowningly on his phone in the semi-darkness of the room. Sensing his presence, Brown looks up at Will and smiles at him just a little bit.

The man walks over and sits down on the bed, getting ready for bed. "What are you reading?" he asks.

Matthew is silent for about a minute, as if realizing that it would be better on his part to lie. And yet, he can't lie to Will. "Greek mythology… I guess," he tries to make his voice sound as casual as possible, but Graham still turns on him with a frown. They look at each other, and then Will sighs heavily, lying down next to him. Brown bites his lip, returning his gaze to the lines about Paris, but immediately nearly drops his phone from his hands as his lover moves closer to his ear, kissing it softly several times, his hand stroking his bare torso. Matthew doesn't hold back the slightly surprised sound that escapes his mouth, feeling goosebumps all over his body. "Ah... Mr. Graham, I... you can't just use this against me like that," he says, clutching the phone in his hands but unable to concentrate on the text. "You can't make me do anything you want with this," he says and licks his lips, turning his head slightly, looking at Will, who arches an eyebrow in a kind of irony, all cocky and handsome like a real god, and Matthew exhales admiringly. "Who am I trying to fool?" he mutters, letting go of the phone and leaning forward to kiss Will on the lips, gently, passionately, his fingers touching the slightly stubbly skin.

Pulling away, he laughs a little, licking his lips, not immediately looking into the man's eyes. Matthew strokes his face gently, as if touching something sacred, and Will sighs, looking back at him thoughtfully. "Why did you decide to read about Paris?"

Brown freezes for just a moment, sliding his gaze across his face, and then licks his lips as he continues to stroke him. "I was wondering what he told you about us," he replies.

Graham, sighing, touches his dark hair, thoughtfully twisting the strands on his finger. "All his words are a masterful manipulation. Metaphors mean nothing in the real world unless you start actively believing in them. This is his tulpa. He tried to plant it in my head, but I rejected it. And now you're letting him do this to you," he looks him in the eye. "Don't. Don't let Dr. Lecter get inside your head."

Matthew looks at him with eyes burning with devotion and, after hesitating for only a second, nods several times, determined to obey this order wholeheartedly. Will nods to him, too, and then kisses him softly on the lips, and Brown breaks into a warm smile again. "You do know how to be convincing," he smirks flirtatiously, and with all his heart rejoices at the smile he sees in return, even if it is quite faint, tired. "Shall I get you a whiskey?" he offers, knowing that sometimes Graham has trouble falling asleep until he's had a sip or two.

The man nods slightly, and Matthew gets up. He turns his attention to his phone and, after thinking about it, picks it up, quickly unlocking and deleting the tabs about Paris from Google, then calmly places the phone on the bedside table and, catching Will's eye, smiles and winks at him as he leaves for the kitchen. On the way, he strokes Mulberry, the only dog that is awake at this time, and secretly gives her some treats, lingering for a moment to scratch her behind the ears before returning to the room with a glass of alcohol for his lover. The man accepts it gratefully, sitting down in bed.

Brown lies down beside him, looking at him with a faint dreamy smile. Will, on the other hand, looks away, beginning to sink into his anxious thoughts, and takes another sip. Matthew gives him time to come to his senses, but when the man leaves the glass on the bedside table and lies down under the covers, still staring nervously at the ceiling, he sighs and lies closer to him, hugging him and nuzzling his nose against his shoulder. "I think Winston likes Mulberry. He stares at her all the time."

Will smiles slightly, covering his eyes. "Yeah, lovers do that a lot, as I've noticed."

Brown laughs softly and kisses his shoulder. "I look at you because I can't believe I am really allowed to see you," he puts his hand over his heart. "I touch you because I can't believe I am really allowed to feel you. I think love is the poorest word one can use to describe everything you bring out in me. Your beauty, your intelligence, your darkness and your light - I am in awe of all of this. My heart... is forever yours."

"Don't say such things," Will says, his heart going out of rhythm.

"But I mean it," Matthew smiles softly. "You know how it started? It was my shift when they brought you in. Of course I'd heard about you before, seen pictures of you in Tattler, but it all just made me feel a normal amount of interest, not anything special. I admired the murders everyone thought you had committed, and I couldn't wait to see what you were like - but I was also afraid of being disappointed. Most of the killers who end up in that hospital were pretty unremarkable - the creations are almost always greater than their creators. But when I saw you then... so sad, so broken, so abandoned by everyone, with extraordinary power in your soul that was splashing like ice in the lakes of your eyes... I thought I had my heart stopped."

"You dropped your keys," Will recalled a vague memory. He wasn't particularly paying attention to what was going on around him at the time, but his brain still retained some details.

Matthew smiles. "Yeah. And blushed," he grins. "Everyone must have thought I was scared, that I was trembling in front of you - well, Chilton certainly thought so. And I didn't want to take my eyes off you and at the same time I couldn't bring myself to look at you. I was *blinded*. I can still see that same light around you."

"Are you sure it's not schizophrenia?"

Brown playfully pats his chest with his palm, not painful at all. "It's love," he says and smiles again. "Eventually I found the strength to look at you, and I haven't been able to look away ever since. And I always hoped to catch your gaze, but you never looked at anyone - other

than at your rare visitors, of course. And I... took the opportunity. Many times I wished I could draw - when I'd come home after my shift I'd sometimes grab a notebook and try to draw something, but to no avail." He's pensively silent, flipping through the book of his memories. "The first accidental touch when I handcuffed you. The intimacy of putting on a mask, looking into your eyes. I felt as if at any moment you could frown at me and make me stop so I wouldn't dare touch you again," he chuckles quietly and licks his lips. "I saw strength and danger in you, I saw you as a bird of prey, but I couldn't be fooled so easily - there was something about the way you blamed everything on your psychiatrist, something deeply sincere. I've always paid attention to the lie, and it wasn't in your words when you threw accusations in his direction. The realization that you were sitting in that vicious place under the Chilton's all-seeing eye while being innocent... hell, when I get all of this, this whole injustice, I got so angry... I wanted to kill Chilton for keeping you there, Hannibal, for all the horrors you went through, Jack and everybody else for not believing you. But I forced myself to think rationally - well, in my own way. I really wanted to get you out of jail. Oh, and how I was sickened when my efforts went in vain. After that I had to think of other ways to help," he goes silent for a while. "I couldn't believe that no one even tried to pass a warm blanket for you. I had to do it myself."

Will frowns confusedly. “It was you? I thought it was Alana's attempt to comfort me."

"She was too busy entangling herself more and more in Dr. Lecter's net," Matthew simply replies. "I also noticed that you were having trouble eating meat, so I started trying to replace it with fish so that you would eat regularly without spitting out most of it," he sighs and strokes his chest.

Graham is silent, realizing that he didn't even pay attention to it at the time, but indeed at some point found himself able to eat his entire dinner without throwing it back up because of a fervent imagination and traumatic memories. He recalls other little things as well, beginning to realize that he had them precisely because of Matthew, and it wasn't a coincidence that they stopped happening after his arrest. A warm shower that didn't make him shiver with every part of his body afterward. Not a rough grip on his elbow as he was being led somewhere. Hair gently tucked behind his ear when it's time to put on his mask. Words, bordering on the line of formal-cold and affable-gentle, given away by intonation. Brown did all this for him and asked for nothing in return. Even on the day of their first conversation, he offered to bring a book for him. Will feels his heart quicken a little at these thoughts. "...Thank you, Matthew," he says softly, meaning it.

Brown smiles, feeling his heartbeat under his palm. "Good night, Mr. Graham," and leaves a soft kiss on his shoulder, gradually falling asleep as he holds him in his arms.

Matthew walks down the dark corridor of the hospital, drawn by an oasis of bright white light ahead, similar to that which normally shines in operating rooms. Just beneath the lamp there is a gurney with a man on it, and the closer Brown gets, the more details he sees, until they all - pale skin, curly brown hair, light stubble - add up to a familiar face. He shortens the remaining distance by running, though at some point he begins to think that the faster he moves, the faster Will slips away from him.

Eventually he does approach him and anxiously calls his name, but he sees no response. He grabs his arm, trying to feel for a pulse, and is horrified at first when he feels nothing, but then his heart suddenly starts and Brown smiles in relief, looking again at his face, which, however, still looks lifeless. Matthew sighs and places a hand on his chest, where he feels the cherished beat better, and can't stop looking at his love.

He senses something is wrong, though, and frowns, trying to figure out what this feeling is related to, until it gets to him: ***the heartbeat is wrong****. It sounds almost crazy even in his own head, but he can't stop thinking about it, so he grabs a scalpel from a nearby table and cuts carefully through the hospital clothes with it, tossing the pieces of cloth aside to reveal Graham's chest to his gaze.*

A coldness covers his body as he sees the incision near his heart, stitched up with red thread, like some kind of a toy.

"No... no-no-no-no-no," he says disturbedly, touching the wound with shaking hands and then wrapping his palms around Will's face, as if hoping to bring him to his senses. His skin is cold and pale. Brown leans in and leaves a kiss of despair on his lips, but no miracle occurs, even as a hot tear rolls down his cheek onto the other man's.

Suddenly the light above them fades, and Matthew feels as if the floor beneath his feet is turning into a black substance that swallows him and Will like quicksand. He doesn't let go of his hands until the last moment, even as the rest of his body swiftly drifts into the unknown space, but in the end Graham disappears completely into the darkness, like sugar melted in tea.

Brown is shaking, keeps calling out for Will, tears are streaming down his cheeks, he feels utterly pathetic and helpless, when suddenly the lights come back on, and he realizes that he is not in a hospital corridor - he is bound hand and foot, sitting at the absurdly long dining room table, with Hannibal sitting at the other end. On the plate in front of him is a raw heart, and he eats it, carefully cutting it off piece by piece, one by one.

Their gazes cross, and Matthew sees a sneer.

He flinches, opening his eyes abruptly, and his breathing is a little louder than usual. He looks at Will, focusing all of his attention on him, and gently touches his chest, listening for the vibration of his heartbeat. He exhales slowly, laying back and closing his eyes.

He rubs his face with his palms, trying to relax and cursing himself for letting Hannibal get so close to his Will, for not stopping it all, for not preventing it. Damn! He should have just taken Will and all the dogs to another country, as far away from Lecter and his bloody admirer as possible.

When Graham wakes up, Brown is still lying next to him, gently holding his hand in his own, stroking his palms and wrists. It is snowing outside the window, and the house is a little cold. Meeting his lover's gaze, Matthew smiles at him. "Morning," his voice sounds a little hoarse after sleep, and Will glances at his watch and realizes that it's still only eight in the morning.

"Morning," Graham also says hoarsely, licking his parched lips.

They lie in silence for a while longer. Matthew studies his hand with touches, and Will enjoys the gentle and reverent attention of his worshiper and the pleasant silence of the winter morning. "Can I share something with you?" Brown asks awkwardly after a while, but doesn't look up at Graham. "I was terribly frightened while I was waiting for you to come out from Hannibal," he says quietly. "I thought he was going to break something in you again and you wouldn't look at me anymore."

"I think I was afraid of that too," Will replies just as quietly.

"I know," Matthew says, remembering the way Graham looked at him before he turned around and left for the hospital building. He sighs and bites his lip. "I can't believe he actually put you through that meat grinder and ended up not even telling you anything about that copycat," Brown says heartily, allowing himself to feel a slight anger and irritation. "How can he think he loves you and yet do nothing to save you? He's a fool, this Ripper. I can't believe I ever admired his work."

"Maybe he did say something about the copycat after all..." Will frowns thoughtfully, staring at the ceiling and biting his lip. "He told me himself that he left enough hints."

"He might have said that just to make you think about your conversation over and over again," Brown remarks, sitting up in bed to look at Graham's face. His hand squeezes his palm. "This is just another manipulation."

"What if it isn't?" Will asks, looking back at him.

Matthew looks at him anxiously. He purses his lips, remembering his dream, and then brings Graham's palm, clasped in his own, to his face, touching the pale knuckles with his cheek and covering his eyes for a few moments, as if needing to catch his breath. He looks at him again, trying to keep himself under control, but his condition still can't go unnoticed, not by an empath - so he does let his voice betray him. "I... I just don't want Dr. Lecter getting inside your head again. I mean... I *know* that your story isn't over yet, and that things are bound to turn out to be bloody, and I know that you and he have your own story in which I'm only a minor character... but is there really no way to prolong my presence on the scene? I don't want to lose you... I know I've already gotten more than I could ever count on, but I very selfishly don't want it to end so quickly, and... and I don't want him to make you suffer again. *I don't want him to consume you in front of me.*"

Graham looks at him anxiously as he speaks, feeling all his emotions, all his despair, all his fear, all the pain of the inevitable future that is coming too close to their threshold. Victim of the Red Queen effect: he feels that he needs to rush forward as hard as he can just to maintain the status quo, to have time to enjoy it. And Will can't blame him for that.

He's scared as hell himself that if he stops running he'll lose Matthew forever, or perhaps worse - lose *the chance to love him* forever.

He squeezes him tighter with his hand and looks him straight in the eye. He licks his lips, trying to figure out what he wants to tell him, what words, what truths he wants to let fly off

his tongue, and then suddenly feels a strange rush of courage and confidence, as if he could close his mind to Matthew's anxieties and remain completely himself, not absorbing his fears, not shaking before them anymore. "I'm not gonna let it end that soon, Matthew," Graham says confidently and with a smirk. "We'll go on a damn fishing trip in the spring. As many times as it takes for me to teach you how to fish. And I don't care what Hannibal imagines about you and me. I've never been as happy as I am with you, and I won't let anyone take that away from me, especially him."

His own heart remains calm, but Brown's heart is ready to leap out of his chest. He looks at him lost, his gaze running across his face as if in an attempt to catch him in a lie, but, seeing only a calm confidence and an honest look, he realizes that Will really means everything he says, and it feels like an explosion. His fingers trembling slightly on the other man's chest, he holds on for one moment, a second, and then abruptly reaches up to his lover and kisses him on the lips, hard, desperate, passionate. Graham embraces him, touching his naked back with warm palms as he responds to the kiss, and when Matthew pulls away slightly, a laugh comes out of his mouth - a pure, sincere laugh, and this laugh is, Will thinks, fucking worth it.

He smiles softly, looking into his adoring eyes, and strokes him lightly on the back. Brown sparks with happiness, and one can see that he is desperately holding back the urge to enclose Graham in a tight embrace, smothering him. "I... oh, God... I love you. I love you. I love..." he closes his eyes, almost gasping with emotions, leaning his forehead against his. Suddenly he laughs. "God, I'm so vanilla. A sixteen-year-old version of me would punch me in the face right now."

Will smiles softly. "A sixteen-year-old version of me would catch a panic attack at the mere thought of someone telling me they love me, lying on top of me in my bed, half-naked. With blood on his hands," he snorts.

"They're clean, I washed them," Matthew smirks lazily, pulling away again a little to look at him, glowing with happiness, biting his lips, then leaning in, kissing his neck, his collarbones, lifting his shirt to kiss his chest, going lower and lower, feeling no resistance from Will, looking at him promisingly. "I want to make this a tradition. Or a morning ritual, like teeth brushing," he winks at him, and Graham chuckles, licking his lips and feeling no desire to stop any of this.

One morning the Ripper opens a page of the Tattler Crime newspaper, a copy of which he receives every week according to his arrangement with Alana. The first thing that catches his eye is a photograph in which, in the background, there is a scrap of the hospital's name, "criminally insane". The rest of the letters are overshadowed by the two people. One is his dear Will, looking slightly darkened by his thoughts, and the other, standing nearby facing him and *holding his hand,* just around the wrist, and looking into his eyes with a soft smile, is the very same Matthew Brown. The title of the article, written, of course, by none other than Freddie Lounds, is, as always, bold, bordering on vulgar: **"Couldn't Take His Life, But Could Take His Husband".** Hannibal's expression barely changed, and he only purses his lips as he reads the rest of the lines with a slightly tense look.

While the public's attention is focused on the new Ripper and everyone is busy speculating about whether he is as brilliant as the last one, the Original, just one year after the trial ended, receives the first visit from his fake (as the FBI claims), partner in crime, Will Graham (known to our readers as one of the Murder Husbands). Was it related to the case all Baltimoreans are so obsessed with nowadays, or was it a purely personal visit? We can only guess.

However, it cannot be ignored that Mr. Graham did not leave the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane alone, but in the company of Mr. Brown, who is known as the Man Who Almost Killed the Ripper.

At the time, investigators were unable to find a connection between Mr. Brown's attempt on the life of an ordinary Baltimore psychotherapist and Will Graham, but our editorial board is convinced that, given all the information we know, the connection does not need to be separately confirmed and seems obvious.

About a month ago Matthew Brown was released from the same hospital where Hannibal Lecter is still being held and nothing was heard from him until that very day when he was spotted in the company of the infamous Will Graham.

From a brief and rather aggressive conversation with Mr. Brown, it became clear to us that his relationship with Mr. Graham was of a romantic nature. "I really don't like it when someone makes him upset," declared the man who killed a bailiff for Will Graham several years ago, and who now walks free after being discharged thanks to the Dr. Alana Bloom's reckless decision.

When asked about the contents of their conversation with Dr. Lecter, the man refused to answer, stating only that he doesn't need anything from Hannibal but to leave Mr. Graham alone.

It seems that the Ripper is unwilling to finally part with his ex-husband, even after their bloody divorce. There is little he can do, however, in the position in which he has imprisoned himself. A far more troubling question is what is the new murderous couple capable of, and how might their affair turn out for the common people of the city? You can read more about the Murder Husbands and Mr. Brown's case on our website...

Hannibal taps his fingers silently on the surface of the table covered by the newspaper, and then returns his gaze to the photograph. His lips quiver with tension as he burns the spot where their hands touched, and there is that unpleasant, acid-tinged feeling of jealousy inside him that he thought he would never have to experience.

He takes a quiet, deep breath, looking up, wondering what he can do with all of this in the position in which he has indeed imprisoned himself.

Chapter End Notes

hey! wanted to say thanks so much to everyone for the support in the form of kudos and comments, it really motivates me and makes me happy, heh. it's gonna be a very long work for me, so i really need this support along the way. love you and i hope you really enjoy reading this!

Chapter 10

Next to Matthew, he felt normal. They woke up and went to sleep together, as couples usually do, they ate together. Sometimes they kissed, sometimes they just lay together and Brown held his hand or his wrist. Everything around Will seemed to be imbued with tenderness, and it couldn't have been anything other than the influence of the love that Matthew felt for him, that passion and that adoration. They took care of the dogs together and laughed together. Sometimes Brown would make jokes about murder or death or prison or something else that had seemed completely abnormal for Will to talk about, much less make jokes about, but he did it so casually and naturally that Graham felt nothing genuinely disturbing about it. Even when he occasionally brought up the subject of their past. Once he burned a pie he was trying to make in the oven, and when he and Will pulled out the tray and saw the black coals in place of what should have been cherry dessert, Brown said before he could actually think about it:

"Fuck, it looks worse than that bailiff."

And Will, instead of retreating into himself, instead of being tormented by his gloomy thoughts again, just... laughed. "Smells too," he said then, and Matthew cracked up laughing.

Perhaps the word "normal" wasn't quite accurate. It was right. Pleasant. Calm. And he felt more or less secure with him; at least he could definitely tell that Brown wasn't killing anyone behind his back and was feeding him normal (not always perfectly cooked, of course, but no one is perfect) food. It gave him that sense of security that had simply eluded Graham for years, one that had never been there for him when he was around Hannibal. Lecter was unpredictable, just as he himself was unpredictable for Lecter. There was definitely something about that, something Will didn't want to admit, but that wasn't what he needed right now; what he needed right now was *rest*, not *becoming*. A rest by the river after a long journey through deserts and frozen icebergs.

These few quiet days felt like a well-deserved vacation, even though an unidentified object loomed at the edge of his consciousness in the form of a serial killer who might want to come after him at any moment. Somehow Matthew always managed to distract him easily from his fears, whether with a joke, a gentle touch, or a flirtation.

Even though Will didn't say the cherished "I love you," there was a feeling that he did. Brown was by his side the happiest puppy dog in the world, becoming a little bolder in his displays of affection - hugging more often, kissing first, albeit gently and hesitantly, letting Graham take the initiative if he wanted to. Their mornings did indeed, as Matthew had suggested a few days ago, begin the same way, and Will didn't find it boring or monotonous at all; he liked how happy Brown was to share those tender morning moments of pleasure with him, how happy he was to be the first thing that made Will smile in the morning. He loved the kisses on his neck and loved the way Matthew moaned miserably and embarrassedly in response to the gentle touch of his lips to his ear or Graham's confident hand on his dick. He soon discovered that Brown had an absolutely absurd habit of covering his mouth with his palm when he had the opportunity, just to stop his flow of overly embarrassing moans or

incoherent lines of adoration. It was as if he was afraid it would be too much for Will, or that he would find it pathetic or funny in a bad way.

It was the first time Graham had been on top of him, resting one hand on the bed next to Brown's shoulder and moving the other on his cock. Matthew had both his hands free and was not in a position to touch Will enthusiastically in return, so he clutched the sheets with one and covered his mouth with the other hand. Graham then tilted his head sideways with interest, scrutinizing his half-hidden face, but he didn't have time to say or do anything about it, because Matthew cummed, trembling his whole body from the current of emotion running through all his parts. But Will wasn't upset about the missed opportunity - he already had plans for the evening that he was determined to carry out, burning with impatience inside to see how Brown would react.

And, oh, he was not disappointed in his partner's reaction. It was about six, and Matthew was sitting on the couch, playing on his phone, and Will was finishing making a lure, running his finger gently over the blue feather. He only did one, seemingly just to distract himself a little and give himself time to finally gather his thoughts. He had already been in the shower, so physically he was ready. But after his first bad experience many years ago, there was still some uncertainty in him about this whole thing. He'd done it with himself at times over the past couple of years, but having another person around when he was so vulnerable and open in every way was... frightening. But it didn't seem so intimidating with Matthew - Will was a hundred percent confident in him, knowing that this man would do anything to please him and that he will never hurt him.

With a sigh, he looks over his shoulder and glances at Brown. "Matthew."

"Hmm?"

"I want you to do something for me."

Brown immediately looks back at him, all ears. "Sure, anything. Just say the words," he smiles, really meaning it. He's willing to do anything for Will - help wash the dog, make pancakes for breakfast, fetch whiskey, do the dishes, kill a man. It's really hard for him to imagine what he wouldn't do for him. Probably the only thing that crossed his mind in that regard was killing Graham. That's something Matthew would never do - he just would not be able to, it would be worse than cutting off his own hand, worse than walking into a fire.

Will answers nothing, rising from his seat and heading toward the bedroom. Brown stares at him a little confused, looking at his beautiful brown curls, already dry after the shower, his plain gray T-shirt, which looks nice on him and accentuates his strong body, and the same gray sweatpants. Matthew traces his gaze with interest, and then, leaving his phone on the couch (hoping that Max won't try to drag it somewhere else in his mouth *again),* he gets up and follows. Realizing that the chances are high that Will will want intimacy with him now, he smirks a little, brushing his dark strands back from his forehead and licking his lips, and gently pushes the door to the bedroom.

He leans his shoulder against the doorjamb, eyeing Will with a smirk. The man stands not far from the bed, with a glass of water in his hands, calmly taking a sip, looking at him. Matthew, knowing that Graham doesn't like to talk about sex directly, reads his innuendos easily, seeing

them in his gaze, feeling them in this room, and therefore he smiles and, taking a step toward him, takes off his white T-shirt, showing off his well-built body to his lover.

Will places the glass on the dresser and Matthew, taking this as a green light, shortens the distance between them with the grace of a wild cat and as if trying to seduce him, to please him with his very sight; he touches his chest, hidden by his T-shirt, and smirks. "I'm always at your service, Mr. Graham," he tries to put into that tone the seeds of the desire that was already beginning to boil under his own skin, and, judging by Will's slightly increased heartbeat, he's succeeded.

Graham licked his lips slightly and then took a step back, laying down on the bed, and Matthew followed very naturally, like a shadow, smoothly and calmly. Just as Will touches the bottom of his shirt to pull it off, Brown takes the initiative to do it for him, and just as the clothes are thrown aside, Matthew finally lays a heated kiss on his lips, to which Will immediately responds. Brown's hands begin to slide over his desired body, rousing him, and he leans forward, forcing Graham to lie on his back, and, pulling away from his lips, moves lower and lower, as usual passing the smile of the scar. As he pulls down his pants and underwear, feeling the sweet anticipation of taking his dick in his mouth like a favorite lollipop, Will is already horny enough, and it's pleasantly flattering - Matthew grins from ear to ear and is already beginning to shower kisses on his thighs, when suddenly Will stops him, clutching his healthy shoulder. "Wait!"

Brown obediently pulls away, looking at Graham a little confused, immediately beginning to worry that he's done something wrong, or that Will just changed his mind for some mysterious reason or something else happened, maybe he remembered something - Matthew mentally has time to prepare himself for everything.

For everything but what he eventually hears from Graham.

"Get the lube. It's-" he licks his lips nervously, a little shyly. "It's in the nightstand drawer."

Brown looks up at him, frozen, as if for a couple of seconds absolutely certain he's running a fever and hallucinating, unable to believe what was behind those words. Will maintains eye contact until Matthew blinks and rises again to the level of his face, placing his hand on his bare chest. "You sure?" he asks and receives a nod in response, and a reverent exhale escapes his lips before he covers Graham's pretty lips with his own, kissing him passionately, intertwining his tongue with his until he runs out of air in his lungs and pulls away, looking at Will like he's a god, as if he can't understand why this man would even let him touch his body with his mortal hands.

"Matthew," Graham calls him softly when he realizes that Brown is having this episode again, and this brings the man out of his trance, and he hurriedly reaches for the right drawer, peering inside and seeing first Will's gun, and then the lube and condoms lying nearby, which he immediately grabs and returns quickly to the desired body, showering it with kisses, eager, quick, and Graham can almost physically feel Matthew's nervousness, his fingers trembling in anticipation. Sweet boy, and Will has such boundless power over him that he doesn't believe it himself. He doesn't even need to manipulate him, doesn't need to deceive him - why, when he can do absolutely anything for him, just to please, just to be liked be him, wanting but never asking for anything in return, careful even when given complete freedom

of action, complete control. It's as if he's in a state of trance now, in a fit of worship of his body, from which it's dangerous to just take him out, so Graham just relaxes watching him, sometimes quietly breathing in the pleasurable sensations of his lips or tongue on his body.

He kisses one of his thighs while he strokes the other, gradually returning from heaven to his task, trying to pull himself together and stop fluttering admiringly at the possibilities before him. He swallows and licks his lips, spreading Will's legs gently a little more, raising a cautious glance at him.

The feeling of being watched closely from above encourages him to do better, and he opens the lube and squeezes it onto his fingers, beginning to warm it up a bit, his free hand continuing to stroke Graham's thigh, and he gets goosebumps running down his skin. "Um... when was the last time you did it?" Matthew asks awkwardly.

Will licks his lips, staring up at the ceiling. "A couple of months ago," he answers, but then rushes to add, "with myself. With another man... I don't know, over ten years ago?" he suddenly chuckles. "Oh, shit. I'm old."

Matthew lubricates his entrance, watching him smile. "Please, let's not have a midlife crisis in this bed. You're not that older than me. And you look divine," he says softly, gently inserting one finger into him; Will expectedly tenses a bit, but not too much. His breathing becomes uneven, but he tries to relax, and Matthew's free hand, with which he strokes his thighs, helps him greatly.

"When did you...?" his voice is a little hoarse.

Brown smiles a little, slowly continuing his actions. "I did it for the first time when I was in medical school. I jokingly offered a guy to practice prostate massage and then happened to be in his bedroom," he says, and Will chuckles. "And the last time... I think it was about a couple of days before we met," he recalls. "A stranger from a club that meant nothing to me and had an arrhythmia."

"Well of course that's what you remember about him," Graham jokes, and Matthew smirks wider, touching his dick to distract him from the sensations of being stretched by more than just talking; it has its effect, and Will seems to be blushing harder, and his lips open for a second, letting a silent exhale spread across the room with a soft sound. "Um..." he bites his lip. "I don't think I should be surprised... that you've been faithful to me... all this time-*ah"* he moans as he realizes that Brown added a second finger some time ago and began scissoring him, slowly and gently, remembering to add more lube from time to time to make everything as painless as possible for Will.

Matthew smiles, keeping the look on his face. "What about your first time, Mr. Graham?" he asks curiously. "Did he treat you well, or should I find and kill him?"

Graham laughs as much as he can in this state. "You're too late; he died of an overdose while we were taking our final exams."

Are they talking about death and murder during sex? Will exhales, trying to relax, just coming to terms with the fact that this seems, if his inner feelings are to be believed, to fit his

understanding of the normal and the acceptable.

It is amazing what progress can be made by gently stretching, rather than tearing, his boundaries of what is acceptable.

Don't think of Hannibal!

It turns out to be surprisingly easy to do the very next moment when Matthew touches his prostate. Graham feels like he's been stabbed, but in an absurdly good and pleasant way, even though he realizes how horribly stupid that comparison is. He opens his eyes wide and a sudden moan escapes his lips, which makes Brown feel a new wave of arousal that settles almost painfully in his groin. He doesn't even take off his pants, just to keep himself in better control, focusing completely on Will and his pleasure, adding a new finger, starting to stretch him better, occasionally hitting his prostate, making Graham moan and blush in an adorable way. "Fuck..." he curses quietly to himself, feeling drunk with excitement and the sight of Will in front of him.

He gets so carried away that Graham has to ask him to stop himself so he doesn't cum too early. When he obeys, Matthew looks into his eyes a little confused, as if he didn't expect Will to want it all right now. A sound like something between a moan and a whimper escapes his lips, and he blushes at his own over-emotionality, realizing that he's never felt like this with anyone before. He's always been a skilled lover, never shy, always rough, and his partners have loved it. But somehow, around Will, he just couldn't do that - he was too in awe of him. It was as if he existed and affected him on a level that no one else could - like that ultrasound that only dogs can hear. It must scare him, and, damn it, it is, but he would never, ever give up any of it. He just hopes desperately that Graham likes it, or at least doesn't despise it.

He takes his fingers out of him and pulls away, very quickly pulling off his pants along with his underwear, throwing them to the floor, trying to touch the hot body in front of him again as quickly as possible. Matthew finds the condoms on the bed and opens the pack with his teeth, impatient and also not trusting his shaking fingers right now. Putting the condom on himself, he takes the lubricant and squeezes some more into his palm, then lubricates his dick, breaking eye contact with Will, and then he moves excitedly closer to him, feeling his own chest heave anxiously in labored breathing, and how much calmer the nonetheless very horny Graham now looks in comparison to him. Swallowing, he looms over him, leaning one hand on the bed beside his head, and steals his kiss, as if hoping to borrow bits of his divine confidence by this. Pulling away slightly, he gently enters Will's supple warm body just a little, watching his expression, his body language closely, to see in time if he does something wrong or hurts Graham.

Will thinks it's cute, but he also thinks he's going to die right now if he doesn't get fucked. "Matthew... more, now."

That hot whisper drives Brown crazy, and he moans quietly, obediently more confidently entering Graham all the way, and, hearing him moan, feeling how perfectly tight, hot he is, Matthew loses himself. "Fuck... Mr. Graham... you're so good... you... it's so... oh god-" he babbles, stopping, giving both himself and Will time to adapt.

"Matthew, don't worry too much," Graham says, finding his cheek with his palm and gently smoothing it and his sensitive ear, and Brown's eyebrows fold into an arch and a quiet sound flies from his lips. "Matthew," he nudges him to make eye contact, "I want to see you. Show me yourself."

"Oh fuck..." he almost falls face down into his chest, feeling like he's got a gun pointed at him. His heart pounds frantically, and he kisses Will's neck mindlessly, before still forcing himself to calm down a little, like he's in his peaceful place now, in the mountains, in a tent, while a fire burns nearby and crickets chirp. He pulls away, licking his lips, and makes the first thrust, making Graham moan, and finally he begins to move in his body, at a steady pace, knocking the sound of pleasure out of Will almost every time and reveling in the sight of him in this moment. There's so much he wants to say now, and quiet sighs, almost like whimpers, keep coming from his lips, but he's afraid it will be too much, afraid of appearing pathetic, especially after he's been asked to be more confident. He, out of old habit, covers his own mouth with his palm, muffling his moans, but Will suddenly grabs his wrist with absolutely no warning and forces his hand away, looking confidently and resolutely into his green eyes.

"I want to see you. And I want to hear you," he says intimately, and Brown moans, dropping his face into his neck, beginning to move less evenly, harder, faster, more erratically. His soft whimper-like moans echo next to Will's ear, and he inhales - when he finds the strength to breathe - the scent of his hair, and strokes his strong body with his free hands, as if wanting to dissolve into him, to get under his skin, to become one with him. He hears him moan in return, they become stronger and louder as he breaks into a faster and harder tempo.

He feels himself on the edge of a pleasure that seems to envelop him all over. "Oh, fuck... I'm so close..." his voice begins to lisp a little, and Will notices to himself through the fog that Matthew must have lisped as a child, and only as he got older was he able to overcome it through hard training, but when he gets particularly excited, it still comes back to him.

It felt very human.

He licks his lips, feeling that he's pretty damn close to his own orgasm as well, and turns his head slightly so that his heated whisper sounds right in Brown's ear. "You're so good, Matthew. Do it for me," he asks and decides to bring him to the right point with the simplest and most innocent action possible: by a slight bite on his earlobe.

"Oh fuck!"

Will feels his pleasure as well as his own, and it becomes even too much, and he cums following him, feeling his legs trembling from the excessive physical pleasure.

Brown falls on top of him, trying to catch his breath, and Graham feels his heartbeat, and it makes him smile as he strokes his hair. Matthew comes out of him and removes the condom before falling back like he's completely exhausted. They lie like that for a while, just coming to their senses, and then Matthew suddenly moans almost in misery. "Oh my God, I'm so pathetic."

Will laughs softly as he continues to stroke his hair. "No, you're just in love and you had a hard time believing the reality of what's happening," he says. "You'll get used to it."

"It doesn't feel like something I can get used to," Brown sighs, and only after a couple of seconds the meaning of Graham's words comes to him and he lights up, rising slightly on one arm to look at Will and smirk slightly, trying not to think about the fact that his ears and cheeks are still a little red from embarrassment. "Well... at least it'll definitely take quite a lot of practice..."

"There you are," Graham laughs softly, looking at him. "I was beginning to worry that I had completely broken you. But no, the flirting function still works," he jokes, tucking a short strand behind his ear.

"All my functions work just fine, I swear. Only some of them do need some recharge time."

"Oh dear."

"What?" Matthew laughs softly, seeming to finally come to his senses after the obvious emotional overload. "You liked it, didn't you?"

Will looks at him with a gentle smile, and they lie like that in silence for a while longer, just enjoying how close they are to each other. "It feels like a honeymoon. Except for the fact that at any moment a serial killer might decide to come after me and gouge my eyes out."

"If he even tries it, I'll burn him alive."

"I… doubt that would count as acceptable self-defense," he says with feigned uncertainty.

Matthew laughs, and his smile seems as warm as the July sun to Graham. "Yeah. I don't really want to go back to the cell," he admits. "Okay, then I'll just shoot him. With that gun you keep in the same drawer as your lube and condoms," he bursts out laughing.

"What? I believe such things should always be close to the bed," Will snorts.

"You like to mix business with pleasure, don't you?" Brown laughs again, burying his nose in his cheek, and then kisses him, again and again, until his lips find his lips, just enjoying the tenderness and love that envelopes them like a feather blanket. Matthew begins gently stroking his naked body, slowly and lazily, and then begins kissing his neck again, and Will has time to wonder how come he has so much energy in him in the first place, when they are suddenly interrupted by a pack of dogs barking - just at the moment when Brown, newly aroused, takes his hardening dick into his mouth.

Graham flinches, looking reflexively toward the window, aware of what this dog signal might mean, and then gently forces Matthew to pull away. Brown moans sadly at this. "If it's Jack, I swear to God, I'll kill him."

Will smiles for a moment, then becomes tense again. He cautiously gets out of bed, trying to find something to wear quickly. Matthew, meanwhile, lies down, looking at him like a sad

dog who hasn't been allowed to get the favorite treat it deserves. Graham smiles softly at him in apology, putting on his pants. "You can wait here if you want."

"You won't be able to save Jack from my wrath, man."

Will laughs and hears a knock on the door and gets up, putting on his T-shirt. "Well, you'll obviously have to get dressed to kill him," he remarks and leaves the room, going to meet the uninvited guest. Matthew stretches out lazily on their bed, looking up at the ceiling, and gives himself another minute to recover before he sits up and puts on his gray pants, deciding to stick with them.

When he walks into the living room a minute later, he freezes as he sees a rather unexpected guest instead of Jack.

Chapter 11

Graham opens the front door and frowns when he sees that it's not Jack but another man standing behind it.

"Hello, Mr. Graham. I'm Special Agent Hector Munday, FBI," the man in the classic suit and beige coat says, showing his ID. "I'm a profiler, consulting Agent Crawford on the case of this admirer," he tucks his ID into his pocket, never taking his eyes off Will for a moment. "I'd like to ask you a few questions. May I?"

The man stands a little confused, holding the handle of the door, and frowns slightly. He immediately recalls his suspicions about this man's murderous nature, but at the same time realizes that he can't find a single socially acceptable reason why he could safely send Munday away right now. "Sure..." he nods a little awkwardly and lets him into the room, closing the door and looking back at Matthew, whom Hector politely greets without looking surprised by his presence here. He must have guessed their closeness when he saw that fight at the bar.

For a few moments the man's attention stops on the dogs, especially Winston, who barks at him several times until Will calms him down by shushing him, and then Hector looks at Matthew again. "You're Charlie's friend, aren't you?" he asks.

Brown seems calm. "More or less," he shrugs, pouring cold water into a clean glass. Then he looks up again, glancing curiously at Hector. "And you're the man who caught the Beast of Arkansas," he says, and Will realizes that Matthew must have wondered about the man after his words about him being an FBI agent. Graham isn't sure what he thinks (or feels) about this.

"And you're the man who almost killed the Ripper," Hector replies calmly, and Matthew wrinkles his nose before taking a sip of water and answering him with mild irritation and something remotely akin to an accusation.

"Everyone is so fond of saying this “almost”, as if I'm the one who screwed up, not the FBI who didn't let me finish what I wanted."

While in prison, he thought a lot about what would have happened if he had managed to kill Hannibal. Abigail would have been alive and probably hanging out with Will as if he were her good friend, and he would have cared for her as if she were his own daughter. There would not have been that bloody scene in Lecter's kitchen, there would not have been all those scars on his lover's body. Will might have visited him in prison more often - if he'd been caught in the clutches of justice after all - and maybe even met him when he got out, and he wouldn't have had to freeze for hours on his porch, waiting for him to come home from the store. All these missed options came to him more than once in his dreams, carrying with them both sweetness and bitterness. He thought less about it now, since he'd finally gotten what he'd always dreamed of, but any mention of Hannibal remaining alive still felt like a slap in the face.

Will coughed awkwardly to get Hector's attention. "Agent Munday, so what did you want to know about this adorer?"

The man turns around, looking at him again. "You know, Mr. Graham, you and I have slightly different methods of profiling. Not better or worse, just different. But I'm desperately trying to find a new way to understand this maniac, because it seems to me that he's something new, not like anything I've ever encountered before. Manny Sherman... The Beast of Arkansas was also the Ripper's biggest fan, but far less sophisticated than our man." Munday walks leisurely around the kitchen, examining the dogs and the interior. "And he chose only weak prey - fragile women whom he lured to empty lots and abandoned buildings. He tried to imitate him, but he didn't understand the Ripper at all, and his murders were more like a reflection in a distorted mirror."

"You think you understand the Ripper?" Will asks with a slight hint of cheeky sneer, knowing full well that no one could ever understand Hannibal the way he did. It was his gift and his curse.

Hector smirks slightly, looking at him calmly and bluntly. "Hardly half as well as you, Mr. Graham," he admits. "That's why I'm here. A sure way to understand a man is to study what he loves," he looks back at Matthew, continuing to grin a bit. "Or what he hates."

Brown hums with a smile, looking at the FBI agent curiously.

Will frowns. "You want to understand the copycat by understanding the Ripper, by understanding me and Matthew?" he arches an eyebrow. "Agent Munday, I can understand Hannibal on a level that is frankly destructive to a human being's psyche, and even I have trouble seeing who his admirer is. It's a path to nowhere. This killer, it could be anyone, and we won't catch him until he makes a mistake, or until Hannibal says his name."

"Hannibal knows who he is?" he asks. "But he hasn't told you anything? Why not?"

Matthew raises his hand, drawing attention to himself before Will can answer. "Oh, that's my bad."

Graham sighs, and Munday nods slightly, stepping a little closer to Brown again. "If I remember correctly, you hung him."

"That's... a rather simplified version of what I was trying to do, but I don't think this is the time to discuss it," Matthew remarks cautiously, glancing at Will. "Besides, that's not why he hates me. He's just being whimsy and unable to accept that someone else is getting more than what he could ever have hoped for," he takes an apple from the table and takes a bite of it, looking completely smug and a little contemptuous now. "Capricious' - that's what he is, this great and terrible Chesapeake Ripper."

Hector just arches an eyebrow and looks at Will. "I doubt that's an appropriate profile for someone the FBI and other agencies haven't been able to catch for decades."

Graham shrugs. "Well, Mathew is not wrong. Hannibal is dangerous, but he's not a God."

Munday thinks for a few moments. "Apparently, his adorer doesn't think so," he notes.

Will snorts. "Yeah, the advice not to meet your idols didn't come out of nowhere - you end up being disappointed in your god in nine out of ten cases because behind the pretty picture you made up by yourself there is actually an average human being made up of flesh and blood, with his own flaws and weaknesses," he sighs. "I wonder what this adorer will do when he realizes he's been making sacrifices in the name of a mere mortal this whole time."

Silence hangs; Matthew habitually admires Graham, pondering that their relationship is exactly this exception, the one in ten case when, after meeting an idol, feelings have only flared with renewed vigor, like a burning match held up to a gas-filled room.

Hector looks at Will, thoughtful, and then chuckles. "Well, most probably he might just try to kill him or something like that," he shrugs calmly, but Brown senses that his relaxedness is fake, and he's curious why. "And yet, Mr. Graham, I know you visited Dr. Lecter and had a chat with him. Listen, is there any possibility that he did say something useful after all? Something about this admirer? I'd like to talk with him myself, but, as you perhaps already know, he refuses to talk to anyone from the FBI," he purses his lips.

Will sighs, rubbing his face with his palms. "He's very careful with what he says, he leaves innuendos and throws around three-layered metaphors that are hard for anyone to understand, just because he is pretentious, smart and educated, and thinks he's better and smarter than everyone else. He builds walls because he's curious to see if anyone will climb through them, but there's rarely anything noteworthy behind those walls. He didn't give me anything, just poked around in my brain and poured his jealousy on me. I'm sorry, but I didn't get anything useful - and I already told Jack this, and I already told you this, he gave me absolutely nothing, no information about this copycat, let alone that he didn't tell me his-"

He freezes, removing his palms from his face, looking at the floor.

Hannibal's voice echoes in his head.

...All this led to the Trojan War, in which Paris himself did not take an active part at first, and his own brother Hector, Homer's favorite hero, the one who later killed Patroclus, and then was killed by Achilles, had to induce him to enter the battle. In the end, Paris was fatally wounded by a poisoned arrow and died, and Helen, alive and unharmed, was found by Menelaus...

...and his own brother ***Hector…***

...the one who later ***killed Patroclus…***

...and then was ***killed by Achilles…***

"Mr. Graham?" Hector asks, raising an eyebrow and looking at him slightly tensely. Matthew beside him looks worried, frozen with a bitten apple in his hands. "Are you all right?"

Will nods awkwardly, as if coming to his senses. "I, uh, yeah. I'm sorry, it happens to me sometimes - the consequences of my encephalitis and... of everything that's happened to me. I

get lost and seem to fall out of reality at times, and my memory has gotten worse, so now I have to take notes on everything that comes into my head about investigations. Fortunately for you," he chuckles. "Matthew, can you get my copybook with notes about our conversation with Hannibal? I keep it in my nightstand drawer."

Matthew stops his gaze on his face, freezing for only a few moments, then continuing to act as calmly as before. "The one on your side of the bed? The one where you keep..."

"Yes," Will doesn't let him finish.

Brown smiles contentedly. "Sure, baby," he says and takes another bite of his apple, putting it on the table and heading calmly and casually into their bedroom. Graham stares after him for a few moments, pondering this unexpected word, but then turns his attention back to Munday, trying not to give away his suspicions.

"Have you ever visited Hannibal?" he asks idly, approaching the table to take an apple as well, but not biting it, just holding it awkwardly in his hands.

"I... used to be his patient years ago, actually," Hector says, and Will arches an eyebrow in surprise, consequently remembering Hannibal's words about how therapy is never a waste of time. The pretentious cannibal scattered clues, hiding them among several hectares of jealous taunts.

Graham snorts. "Well, I can imagine it was a pretty unorthodox experience."

"We didn't have time to finish with it, after only three sessions he... ran off to Europe," his voice is even and calm, but Will senses notes of disappointment. "But yes. It was a little different from what I expected when the bureau made me go to the therapist."

"I bet. May I ask why the bureau did it?" Will looks genuinely curious.

Hector hesitates to answer for a few moments, glancing toward the dogs. "Nervous breakdown at work, beat up the Beast during questioning."

Will knows Hannibal well enough to know that during his sessions with Munday he gently nudged him toward insanity, nurturing in his mind the seeds of acceptance of his dark side, the perception of violence and death through an aesthetic point of view. And this is what it has led to now - Graham feels in his gut that he has a very high chance of ending up on the tip of his knife. "We saw you at the bar not too long ago," Will decides to engage him in conversation, imagining at this moment Brown trying to check the number of bullets in his gun as quietly as possible. "Did you meet Charles before you started visiting Dr. Lecter, or after?"

It's a shot in the dark, but Will knows by the spark in his gaze and his slightly tense body: it's a bullseye.

But Hector doesn't budge, doesn't lie down voluntarily in Graham's mental x-ray machine. "Are you trying to psychoanalyze me, Mr. Graham?" he asks, and Will feels as if he is alone with the predator.

"No more than you're trying to psychoanalyze me, Agent Munday," Graham keeps a little distance from him, just in case, and feels the tension in the air. He felt something similar right before Randall burst into his house through the window. Will knows he's been figured out, and he doesn't understand why Matthew is still not here - or perhaps he is just waiting, intending to fire a shot as soon as he sees the obvious danger? Graham swallows as he looks up at Hector and lets himself get hooked on his confidence, mimicking his emotions. With Lecter this usually worked out naturally and without much difficulty, but with other killers and psychopaths it was always more challenging.

"It was something personal, wasn't it? I should have guessed right away. You tried so hard not to feel anything when you killed that guy, tried so hard to do it all medically and nonchalantly, as if he were just a doll, because if you looked at him as at a living person, you'd see *him.* Not me. You looked at the way I betrayed Hannibal, and you fear that Charlie will betray you as well."

The man freezes, like a panther lurking in the bushes before it lunges at its prey and tears it apart with its strong paws and sharp fangs.

"Have you already told him you're a killer, Agent Munday?" Will asks, clutching an apple in his hands and keeping his calm gaze on Hector. "Oh, you have. And now you're afraid he'll do what I eventually did. It's not like Charlie looks like someone capable of killing - believe me, I'm good at seeing this kind of things. He'll give you up eventually, once you start to slowly lose control, or when he realizes that he can't live like this, that love isn't an excuse for anything in the world. And then he'll call the police. Who knows, maybe he's doing it right now."

There is a strange noise coming from the second floor, and Graham frowns, looking up reflexively. Hector looks up, too, but more calmly, and then lowers his gaze to Will again. "Apparently he isn't," he remarks, and takes advantage of Will's moment of confusion by pulling out his hidden knife and stepping toward him. Graham manages to dodge at the last moment and throw an apple in his face to win at least a few extra seconds to grab the fish-cleaning knife lying in the drawer. He takes a swing, but Munday dodges and grabs his wrist, and he is so much stronger than Will physically that he reflexively throws the knife and the next moment he is pinned against the wall, with the blade at his neck.

A gunshot comes from above, and they both freeze. Graham sees in his gaze what he must be seeing right now in his.

They both wonder if they have just lost their loved ones.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few years ago.

The Hannibal Lecter's office has comfortable chairs and a pleasant semi-darkness, which is not helped at all by the faint sunset light pouring in from the windows. Hector feels completely out of place, very exhausted, having hardly slept for several days because of nightmares. He has dark circles under his eyes, and they are so bad they are almost red, and his knuckles are still shattered from what happened last week in the interrogation room. The tie around his neck feels too tight, and all the words on their way to his tongue are settling in an unpleasant dust in his throat. He's been silent for quite some time now, staring at his hands, an actual proof of what he's done.

"I think this is a waste of time," he says hoarsely after a while, clenching and unclenching his fingers and finally looking up at the psychiatrist, who has been sitting patiently opposite him for about fifteen minutes. Hardly his first silent patient, Dr. Lecter seems a very experienced professional who knows how to keep his face. Hector looks into his eyes and sees a familiar coldness, the same coldness he has seen in his own since early life. This coldness comes from childhood traumas that burn with their frostiness. Munday himself had a degree in psychology and had been profiling long enough to know that such professions are often pursued by people who need this kind of help themselves. They study other people to understand themselves.

It doesn't seem to work. It didn't work for him.

"Therapy is never a waste of time," Dr. Lecter remarks calmly, having no trouble withstanding his heavy stare. He pauses before continuing, and each of his words is carefully chosen, as Munday realizes, each having its own purpose in the sentence. "It helps us build a dialogue with our inner beast and the outside world."

Hector arches an eyebrow, looking at the therapist. Really? Beast? It wasn't a random word; this man doesn't just throw them around. Well, it seems to tell a lot about him as a person.

In the end, Munday just decides to accept the rules of this game and, with a sigh, places his hands on the armrests of his chair. "I suspect that my inner beasts have their embodiment in the outside world."

"And you tried to get rid of it because it made you face the part of yourself you don't want to give a way out?" Dr. Lecter asks, and Hector chuckles, raising his gaze to the ceiling. He never answers his question, so Hannibal continues. "Whatever Mr. Sherman told you, it seems to have been something intimate enough to provoke that kind of reaction in someone who is quite restrained and obsessed with self-control."

Munday looks at him again, but only for a couple of moments, immediately as if finding the entourage of the room more appealing to his attention. Finally he wrinkles his nose, as if thinking about something disgusting. "He talked endlessly about his idol, about the murderer who inspired him to become a murderer. About the Ripper" when he says this, Hannibal blinks, but this emotion, no doubt vivid for this man, goes unnoticed by Hector. "I... had to do a portrait of Sherman. I always do that when I catch them, to understand them better. But it was like... Manny is all about his obsession. Well, almost. Another twenty percent of his personality is insolence and ignorance. And… manipulativeness. He was manipulating me, driving me emotionally to do this to him."

"Why would he do that?"

"I think he wanted to prove to himself that he was right about me," he shrugs and bites his lip nervously. "From the very beginning he's been trying to prove to me that I'm just like him. Said he could see it in my eyes. The gleam in them," he is silent for a while. "He wanted to see my hands in blood. When I started beating him, he asked if he'd be my first."

"Was he?"

"The first man I beat half to death?" Hector asks a little defiantly, looking at the doctor again, but he only stares at him calmly, waiting for an answer, and Munday purses his lips, leaning back in his chair again. "I... no, he *wasn't."*

Lecter looks intrigued, but Hector is not going to broach the subject. The silence lingers, as if Hannibal wants him to say something more to avoid embarrassment after all, but Munday is used to this - he hasn't liked to talk much since childhood anyway.

Finally Lecter realizes this. "What are your dreams about?"

"What kind of dreams a profiler who regularly talks to serial killers can have?" asks Hector a little wryly.

Hannibal looks at him calmly. "I can imagine." Silence. "Does it bother you that you do bad things in your dreams?"

Munday sighs. "I keep convincing myself that it's okay for someone with a job like mine. You can't delve into the minds of psychopaths and maniacs and then just shake the dirt off your coat and go have coffee with your partner."

"But these nightmares and sleep problems did intensify precisely after you beat up your Beast," guesses Lecter effortlessly. "Tell me why."

Hector bites his lip, stopping his gaze on Hannibal, on his predatory, dark eyes, and something about the man compels him to answer honestly, with a bitterness in his voice so strong it is almost painful; the words are like knives in his throat.

"Because when I beat him, I felt like I couldn't stop, I felt like I wanted to do it," he pauses, "I really wanted to kill him. I still want to. Because *I know it would feel good."*

He was sure he was just imagining the smile on Hannibal's face.

The second session made him feel a little better, probably because of how abnormally supportive and calm Lecter was about his fantasies about killing Sherman. He certainly still wasn't ready to tell him about the murdered homeless man whose body had already been found but had absolutely no connection to Hector - and will never have. So they discussed his childhood.

Lucinda was a terrible mother, Munday understood that, and still he forgave her, as if he thought she was always right about him. After all, he really is a terrible man. Hannibal speaks of a self-fulfilling prophecy, but for Hector it does not become something he really wants to argue about. The past has always seemed to him nothing more than painful scars on his back left by his mother's belt and a weight of a tasteless porridge on his tongue. Much more important to him was the present - a guy a couple of years younger than him, hyperactive, prone to petty crime (given Hector's personal experience, breaking into a newspaper office didn't really fall under anything he thought of as a socially dangerous act), cute, and of course, having no idea who fate had tied him to. The young man is irrevocably in love (Hector has many questions about how this happened, especially since he's been looking more like a drowned man lately, back from the dead just to get a cup of coffee), and Munday... definitely feels both interested and absolutely gripped by some kind of animal fear. He had just discovered this new quality in himself, this frightening passion for violence, had literally stepped into a new worst period of his life, and it would have been rational to get rid of him right away for the young man's sake so that he wouldn't even want to go back into his dark life, but... he couldn't do that. Tried several times, but found himself helpless as soon as Charlie did or said anything. He had a dark sense of humor and experience with criminals, including murderers, and it gave Hector a very, very dangerously deceptive hope of acceptance.

Of which Hannibal, of course, was by no means trying to dissuade him.

On the contrary, in fact. He, having his experience with Will before his eyes, was pushing Hector in every way to get closer to this young man, and the latter could not resist this psychiatrist's influence. As in so many other matters.

At the third session, they returned to the subject of Sherman and, by extension, the Ripper.

"Manny Sherman is convinced that he was essentially doing what the Ripper is doing. What's most annoying about this is that it's just not true," Hector says. "I actually had to look into the case more closely. I even saw Agent Crawford, although he turned out not to be very talkative. The Beast... that's not how he did his murders at all. He lured fragile girl realtors and the like to abandoned places and killed them, feeling his power over the weak. He killed them for nothing, just because he felt like it, because they were easy prey, that's all. The Ripper murders are different. They both want to make their mark on history, but Sherman is unlikely to succeed, and the Ripper has every chance," he shuts up. "Unfortunately," he adds for some reason.

Post factum, he could only wonder how much it all pleased Hannibal's ego. To see his activities engender interest in people, the desire to imitate as the highest form of flattery - who could dislike that? Certainly not the Ripper. Hector thought he understood him well, and

this feeling was only exacerbated when he saw a report on television in the morning that the identity of the serial killer had been revealed, that it was his psychotherapist all along. *It was the catharsis.* He replayed in his head all their conversations, all Lecter's glances, all his own feelings and suspicions, which he had dismissed by focusing on himself at his behest. Suddenly everything made sense: every word he said, every question he asked, and those glimmers of interest in the first two sessions, and the shadow of anxiety in the last one that had happened a few days ago. He knew something was coming, and, unable to give the patient his full attention, was anxious. Hector began to seek out more information about him, like a student eager to absorb as much knowledge as possible before an exam with his favorite professor, and learned everything about him that was at his reach. He had to get used to Freddie Lounds' style as she was the main purveyor of information of varying quality about this case. He had to get used to a sense of understatement, because there was simply too little information on the net.

Oh, and he had to learn a lot about Will Graham, too.

The more he thought and learned about Will, the more he thought about Charles. The man was under his skin, part of his heart, and he was willing to kill for him, but there was simply no way or reason for him to do so. He looked at Charlie through the prism of the Ripper and his friend's story, seeing parallels even where objectively there were none. They were different.

But Hector just couldn't let go of the idea that their *end* might be not so different.

Now.

Trying to make his way up to the bedroom calmly and without rushing, Matthew opens the door, immediately speeding toward the right nightstand. He opens the drawer, feeling a little anxious about leaving Will alone with the killer, but immediately forces himself to calm down - Graham has everything under control, and this shouldn't take Brown much to... wait, where's the gun?

He frowns at the contents of the drawer, not understanding anything, until he hears the distinctive click of the safety catch behind him. Matthew freezes, biting his lip, scrolling desperately through his head for possible scenarios, when suddenly he hears a familiar voice:

"Put your hands up," Charlie instructs, and Brown's eyebrows raise a little in surprise. A realization of what is happening gradually comes to him, and he slowly raises his hands, turning to face the old acquaintance. Charles Lonnit looks worried, twitchy, uncertain, and the way he holds the gun is like a child holding a bottle of water that's too heavy - it's about to slip and fall to the ground, causing a lot of noise. His eyes betray fear, Matthew focuses on his pupils, then slides his gaze to his shaking hands, and smiles.

"You're prone to breaking the law, but you're not a murderer, Charlie," he smiles, fully confident.

"Shut up!" he commands, continuing to hold him at gunpoint.

"You're not that type of person. You can watch, but never participate," he still keeps his hands raised, taking a small step forward; Charles expectantly takes the same step back. "Look, I know what love can do to people, but you, kid, you're just scared to death right now. It shouldn't be like this. I mean, the two of you could, I dunno, talk about everything first, you know, the feelings, the fears, the boundaries. I hear that this is what people usually do for a healthy relationship," he takes another step forward, but Charlie stays where he is, frowning his eyebrows and trying not to breathe too nervously. "Just listen to me. I have an idea on how we can both get out of this situation - and please think about it as quickly as you can, because, frankly speaking, I have much more important things to do downstairs." Matthew smiles slightly, keeping his gaze on his face. "You don't want him to die, am I right? Of course you don't. I totally get it. You don't want to betray him either, because that... would be sad and unpleasant, I agree. I hate betrayal more than anything too. So, how about we make sure he remains confident that you haven't betrayed him?"

Charles is silent, looking at him with his lips pressed together, and Brown decides to take this as permission to continue, despite the muzzle pointing at his chest.

"Here's what we'll do: you'll shoot in the side of the door, like, three times. You tell Hector you tried to kill me, and we'll tell the police you were just scared, that he'd already finished with us and went to finish you off - something like that, well, you used to be a screenwriter, not me, you can probably think of something plausible" he starts slowly lowering his arms, coming closer and closer. "Then I kind of took the gun from you, hitting you, and tied you up."

"He'll think I'm weak and useless."

"But he'll be sure you're loyal. Believe me, even in his frame of reference, that's surely more important," he smiles supportively, holding out his hand for the gun. "Charlie. You don't have time to ponder my offer. Decide right now, and I promise I won't kill Hector."

Charles frowns. "So what, I'm just supposed to take your word for it?"

Matthew sighs, spreading his hands. "Man, that's the way this world works, I'm not fond of it either," he lowers his gaze to the gun and nods at it. "So?"

Lonnit continues to stand still, biting his lip and his gaze lowered slightly, and Brown nervously gives it a few more moments, firmly deciding that it's time to do something about it, a noise can be heard from the first floor. Charlie is shaking a bit. "He's going to spend the rest of his life in jail, isn't he?"

"Well, if he's not a complete moron and intelligently plays the card of his insanity - and he clearly is not okay, no offense - he could be put in a hospital for criminals. And it's possible to get out of there, believe me, I know what I’m saying."

"You killed one man."

"Charlie, the alternative for Hector is death," Matthew says firmly. It sounds harsh and like a mental slap in the face, but he can't keep being soft and patient - not when Will is alone on the first floor with a maniac who has made it quite clear that he wants to kill him - and in a

painful way. If Charles doesn't give him the gun right now, he'll just take it away and shoot him in the leg to keep him out of the way while he saves his loved one.

Lonnit's hands shake a little, and he purses his lips, lowering his gaze, and finally still relaxes his hand, allowing Matthew to take the gun. The man immediately shoots toward the door and then hits Lonnit in the head with the gun's grip. There is not much time left, he is in a hurry, so he decides to do this instead of tying him up - nothing bad will happen, he is as sure of it. *He is a former nurse after all.*

He rushes downstairs quietly so as not to give away his presence before time. Will, back when the shots first sounded, seizes the opportunity and, while Hector is distracted for a few moments by his worry for Charles, reaches for the nearly empty bottle of whiskey standing on the table nearby, grabs it and smashes it against the man's head, pushing him away from himself. The man comes to his senses too quickly, and this is clearly not a fair fight for Graham; he thinks of whistling at the barking dogs, which are idle without their master's command, but is afraid to risk them. He tries to hit him, but he dodges and punches him right in the face, and it hurts like hell - not like when he had his skull tried to be cut open with a saw or when he was bleeding on Hannibal's kitchen floor, of course; now he was only in physical pain, and that made everything a little more bearable.

But the feeling was still horrible, his ears ringing for a couple of moments, he loses his focus, and imagines rather than actually sees the man pulling out his knife again, about to bring it to the site of the scar, as suddenly he hears two claps, in which he is not immediately recognize the gunshots. It isn't until a couple of moments later when his gaze manages to focus on the man in front of him to see him recoil, grabbing his shoulder but still staying at his feet. Will sees the rage in his eyes, coming from the realization that his partner in crime is probably already dead, and he turns around to pounce on Matthew as he immediately shoots him again, this time in the hand that holds the knife.

By some miracle, the man barely even screams in pain, clenching his lips and still, driven by adrenaline or something, moves at Brown, who raises his eyebrows a little surprised, not understanding how Hector is still that okay. Matthew pulls the trigger again, but no shot is fired, and he bites his lip, trying to come up with a new plan, as he suddenly sees movement behind the agent followed by Will pushing him sideways so that he finally loses his balance and falls to the floor. The next instant Graham is on top of him, mercilessly striking him in the face over and over again, and Brown watches this for a few moments as if mesmerized before he notices the man trying with his left hand to get something from his pocket - instantly reacting, Matthew is next to him and steps on his arm with force slightly below his elbow, causing him to open his palm and drop his spare knife. Will continues to punch him in a fit of wonderful fury, and Brown notices that at one point the man beneath him is losing consciousness, but Graham doesn't stop. He opens his mouth, wondering whether this biblical picture should be interrupted.

He doesn't have enough sense of morality to save this murderer for Charles just because he gave him his word. After all, he said that he won't kill Hector - and, technically, it wasn't *him* killing Hector right now.

Watching the blood streaming across the floor, watching the increasingly deteriorating state of Munday's face with each punch, it all gave him incredible pleasure, an extreme degree of bliss. He's willing to watch it forever, letting the life drain out of the body of the man who wanted to take Will from him.

Graham is as beautiful in his anger as he is in his happiness. Matthew suddenly wonders what will happen when Will comes to his senses and realizes what he has done, what Brown has let him do.

He will be in pain. He will hate himself. He will be unhappy.

Matthew forces himself to make the right decision.

"Will," he calls out, leaning down to touch his shoulder blade and stroke it, and the man immediately freezes, breathing heavily, raising his head and looking at his lover. Matthew throws the gun away to free his hand and gently takes him by the upper arm. "He's unconscious, that's enough. Come on," he gently pulls him up, urging him to get up, and the man frowns puzzledly, trying to understand his motives, but obeys nonetheless. "That's it. Well done," Matthew praises in a tired voice, pulling the fully risen Graham to him and wrapping his arms around him, stroking him soothingly on the back. "Well done, Will."

Graham's hands are shaking as well as his whole body, and he squeezes Brown in his embrace, staring into the distance and trying to comprehend what has happened. He almost killed a man. But Matthew... stopped him? It feels strange, though Will realizes it was the right thing to do, and in the future, when the anger that has been empathically transmitted to him from Hector subsides, he will be grateful to Brown.

He breathes heavily, gradually calming down, looking toward the stairs. "You..." his voice sounds hoarse and he swallows. "You killed him?"

"Charlie? No," Matthew replies, continuing to hold Graham in his arms. "The boy's passed out. I shot through the door. Oh, we've got holes in the bedroom door now!" it suddenly gets to him.

Will laughs a little at the absurdity of this remark in its present context. "Why did you shoot the door?"

"This is a long story," Brown sighs, pulling away from Graham after all, taking him gently by the wrist, looking into his eyes. "Let's call Jack, shall we?" he suggests, and Will nods, feeling his emotions gradually seem to calm down around Matthew, replacing the anger with the peace of mind he's always lacked. "You go ahead, and I'll make a citizen's arrest of this tenacious son of a bitch," he smiles, his free palm gently touching his cheek so as not to press on the bruised spot.

"Do you have handcuffs?" Will asks with a soft chuckle.

"No, but I have some experience working as an orderly in a mental hospital for sick psychopaths. I do know how to keep big men in check," he says and winks at him, and Graham rolls his eyes before he leans forward and touches his lips with his own, stealing a

soft, smooth kiss with the taste of his own blood on his tongue. Then he pulls away and steps slightly wobbly away from Matthew toward the phone, feeling his gaze on him for a few more moments.

By the time the FBI arrives, Hector regains consciousness, but only to be loaded onto a gurney and be handcuffed to it and carried away to the ambulance. Charles is questioned about what happened and Brown, sitting on the couch next to Will and the dogs, eavesdrops to help confirm his version of what happened. Surrounded by the commotion going on, with the light of police lights flashing outside the window and the presence of many people in their house, they try to pay attention only to each other, relaxing, making the excuse that they need time to come to their senses. Price offers Will his help with the wounds on his hands and face, but he refuses, just continuing to apply to his forehead the ice pack Matthew gave him. Somewhere outside the window, Miss Lounds' red head flashes, but she doesn't manage to sneak into the house, so she pesters Jack instead of them.

After a few hours, they are finally alone. Brown turns his head slightly, leaving a tentative kiss on the top of his head, and Will smiles slightly, immediately wrinkling a bit in pain. "Matthew," he begins a little hoarsely and quietly, as if he doesn't want to disturb the strange peace that now reigns in their home.

"Mm-yeah?" Brown asks sleepily, continuing to gently stroke his shoulder.

"Why did you stop me?" he asks something that hasn't stopped torturing him this whole time.

Matthew sighs softly without opening his eyes. "I don't know. You've always seemed to speak out against the idea of taking someone's life. Figured your order not to kill for you applies to you as well," he shrugs. "Not that I haven't been tempted to watch the righteous wrath of my god, I just thought you'd blame yourself for all this in the future and... that would be sad" he falls silent, eyes ajar and staring at the fireplace thinking about everything that's happened.

Will, too, is silent for a while, realizing Brown's words. He was sure that the man, even if not encouraging him to commit murder, would still be thrilled at the prospect of watching his god punish a sinner before his eyes. He figured it would overpower any voice of reason, because when Matthew is near him, his voice of reason is usually drowned out by cries of adoration and jubilation. But that's not what happened. He didn't mind that Will wanted to kill the man, as Alana or Jack would have been. Nor did he want to support it by pushing him to the edge of madness, as Hannibal would have done. It felt like something entirely new, it ***was*** something entirely new. And Graham... madly wanted to dissolve into this new thing, to explore it, to enjoy it. In that moment he felt that maybe he really had a chance to be with someone completely himself, with all his dark and bright sides, with his fears and desires, with his past and future, with his doubts, feelings, emotions. Now he had someone in his life beside whom he could safely be himself and be sure that no matter what, he would be accepted just for who he was and would be surrounded by the care he had needed since his early childhood.

He carefully finds Matthew's hand and moves it to his chest, letting him listen to his heartbeat, and turns slightly to look the man in the eye. There is absolutely no worry, and he feels as confident as he's never felt before when he says those words that never seem to have come off his lips before, definitely not with that soft smile, and definitely not as sincere and

plain. He says it with all his heart and feels happiness mixed with contentment, as if he were throwing off the heavy leaden shackles and straightening his back after years, stepping out of his confinement into the open field, next to the stream reflecting the warm rays of the midday sun.

He feels ready to live for these words, for the meaning behind them, and he knows how much they really mean now, spoken between the two of them in the silence of the dawn-filled house.

He says it with the warmth of a smile on his lips and the softness in his gaze, feeling Matthew's racing heart under his palm, as he gets ready to hear a gentle, confident, honest confession-promise, a vow he'll want to brand into his own skin, just so he can never forget about it. He hears just three words -

"I love you."

And it makes him realize, with a smile on his face, that everything is going to be all right.

Chapter End Notes

so! it's not an ending, but it's a very important point in the story. i have several new chapters already written (but only in my native language so far) and i will start translating them soon, i promise. but i will be busy for the next couple of days because of exams, so i'm not sure if i'll be able to post it. But in the worst scenario, the next chapters will start coming out in a week, so don't worry - I won't leave you without this story, huh. also, i have another little idea in mind, but i'll work on it after i finish this one i think.

anyway, thanks so much for reading, liking and commenting! i'm glad i decided to start writing this.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

still at my finals, but really wanted to post something, so here we are :)

Spring is turning out to be particularly warm this year. Standing almost knee-deep in the water and quietly watching the float, Will keeps glancing away towards the shore. There, on a blanket spread on the green grass, a sleepy Matthew lies relaxed, sunbathing in the morning light. He has a grass clamped between his teeth, and he is lying on his side, his head propped up with his hand, and he's reading a book from Will's home library. Graham likes to watch him as he slowly turns the pages, the way he reacts to the lines he's just read - with a smile or a slightly tense brow, a chuckle or a pursed lip. Sometimes he lazily drives away the flying insects that land on his half-naked body, and in doing so he amusingly resents them as if their bare existence offends his dignity. Will smiles as he looks at him, and their eyes suddenly meet; Brown immediately blossoms into a happy smile that makes Will feel warm and comfortable.

Graham senses the tension in the line and distracts himself in order to pull the fish out. When he succeeds and heads with his catch closer to shore to throw it into the bucket, he hears a half-joking applause and snorts with a smirk. "Damn, it's so big!" Matthew marvels, then laughs at his own comment, and Will rolls his eyes. Glancing at the contents of the bucket and then at his watch, he decides it's time to call it a day. He carefully puts the fishing rod away and sits down to rest a bit on the stump by which Brown is lying, and the man puts the book away, looking at him with a smile and squinting slightly at the sun. "Caught everything you wanted?"

Will smiles softly back at him. "I think so," he replies, and Matthew snorts contentedly, laying on his back and stretching like a lazy cat. "Do you want to try to catch something?"

"Well, unless you want me to hook you by accident again when I cast my rod," Brown remarks, and Graham laughs a little.

"Come on, you weren't that bad. And it caught on my clothes, not my eye, so it was okay," he says. "You caught two fish."

"Caught more if there wasn't someone around who I really wanted to kiss till my pulse dropped," he smirks. "You're a huge distraction."

"So are you," Graham notes in a calm voice, and Matthew blossoms in smugness.

They've been together for months, and Will still hasn't regretted his decision to let Brown stay. With him, his gloomy, cold life was filled with light, fun, and warmth. Childhood

traumas seemed to have made his partner terribly fond of jokes, so at some point Graham realized that he was laughing every day now, often even several times a day. Matthew loved to goof around, dancing while he cooked, commenting on the movies they were watching, often whispering in Will's ear some jokes about dumb character decisions. Sometimes he even parodied Chilton or Jack again, just to make him laugh - he clearly enjoyed seeing the smile on his face and hearing the gushing laughter that seemed to Will like something unfamiliar on his lips.

They had gone fishing together several times - once just on shore, another time on a boat. The first time Graham had tried to teach his boyfriend how to fish, he had gotten a little nervous or over-excited and hooked his lover instead of the fish, then immediately felt ashamed that he had not succeeded in being a perfect fisherman on his first try. Will then joked that Matthew had "hooked him," and it helped Brown relax, feeling a wave of pleasure throughout his body at the realization that he really had. The second time he was able to cast the line into the water, but he didn't catch his first fish right away - and if it hadn't been for Graham, Brown wouldn't have even noticed it was biting - but Will quickly told him about it, and thanks to that he caught his first fish. It was a beautiful feeling, but it was even more beautiful to watch Graham, smiling, watching at him, like a loving parent watching a child earn his first-ever medal.

That association made him remember his adolescence, when he was a swimmer and, for the first time in his life, was able to achieve something by winning first place in a competition. That medal was still hanging somewhere in the orphanage, as if it were the achievement of that place, not Matthew, who hated it. The next time Brown cast his rod and they waited in silence for a bite, he was deep in thought until at one point he flinched when he realized he was frowning and that Will was also looking at him thoughtfully and frowningly.

Turning to Graham, he gave him a slightly apologetic smile. "The silence of fishing makes me sink into memories. What do you usually think about when you're doing this?"

Will shrugged, looking at the float again. "I usually manage to think about the river, the fish, the process itself. Sometimes I think about my childhood... how my dad taught me to fish, how we did it together. Those are good memories," he admitted, and then tried to ask gently, "do you think about your childhood too?"

Matthew sighed. "Sort of. But it's not a good memory," he started looking at the stream. "Though it's more accurate to say spoiled,'" Brown bit his lip, wondering if he should tell Will, but decided to stick to his rule of never lying to him and never telling him lies of omission. "When I was a teenager, I used to be a swimmer. Initially it was just my way of gaining favor with my orphanage teachers and peers, but then I realized I really liked it. I started hanging out in the pool almost all the time I could. Competed a couple of times and always got first or second place."

Will listened to him with the kind of sympathy no one else seemed to be capable of. "But they didn't care?" he guessed.

Matthew nodded. "I kept doing it, but not competitively anymore. Went to the pool most of my adult life, kept myself in shape that way," he didn't continue, pursing his lips.

Graham understood anyway. "But you haven't been going to the pool since that place became associated with defeat rather than victory."

"And with the pain of being shot in my left shoulder."

Will was silent, noticing that they'd missed the fish, but not saying anything about it. "There's some nice places to swim in the summer, if you still like the process," he said suddenly. "I could take you there in July. I used to go there sometimes to hang out with my dogs."

Matthew looked at him with his usual expression of love and adoration. He smiled. "I love it when you do that. Making plans for the future with me."

Graham shrugged, perhaps only slightly embarrassed by this realization. "Have you thought about the fact that you'll have to celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve with our dogs instead of going to some funny party?"

"Oh come on, you're spoiling me now!" Brown laughed, looking again at the float, and they, already much more relaxed, continued fishing. The second time, Matthew had already turned down the opportunity to hold the rod, instead sitting in the boat and watching Will with the undying smile of a lovesick boy on his face. He watched him and couldn't stop thinking about drawing him closer and kissing him right there, making him look only at himself, forcing him to forget about fishing and everything else, thinking only of his faithful admirer. He didn't, but Graham certainly caught the urge, and with a friendly sneer arched an eyebrow as he looked at him. Matthew wasn't confused and sent him an air kiss before he laughed softly and leaned back, looking up at the sky overhead, swaying pleasantly, lying in the boat, hearing the crickets and the splashing of the water.

Since there was no more murderer looming on their doorstep, they began to allow themselves some time alone - Matthew sometimes went into town by himself to take care of his old apartment and other business that required his intervention, and Will sometimes went to the store alone. At first this made them tense, of course. Graham once couldn't help himself and, after three hours alone, texted Brown to see if he was all right - he tried to do it cautiously and as if carelessly, but the man seemed to understand anyway, because he was feeling the same kind of anxiety. He sent his selfies along with his answer, and Graham snorted, thinking it was stupid and cute at the same time. After that, every trip Matthew made to town was accompanied by a bunch of pictures, both of the young man and of everything around him, especially of the dogs the owners walked in the park or sat with outside at the café. While before Will's phone gallery used to be almost completely empty, now there was not only their dog’s pics, but also Brown’s, and there was just hundreds of them.

Gradually their relationship became more and more balanced. Matthew was cautiously probing the ground, and though he still almost always called him Mr. Graham, he allowed himself to be more confident. His touches became more possessive, he initiated them more often, and he finally really proved himself in sex, making Will scream and whimper with pleasure. He still treated him with awe and outright adoration, but he realized that the form of adoration could be absolutely varied and not limited to cautious tenderness. And there was something thrilling about his deity letting him rise to his level, making him feel special, unique, chosen. He felt like a prophet, the only person capable of reading the holy tablet of

this body. He learned every inch of his beloved by heart, giving pleasure and receiving just as much in return.

It didn't feel like a honeymoon; it felt like the perfect family life. Matthew found himself standing in front of the jewelry store several times thinking odd thoughts, but he always reminded himself that it would be weird and might scare Will away. He wouldn't want to mess things up by being too rushed, even considering that, in fact, marriage wouldn't change much except the paperwork. They were already living together, Will called the dogs "our dogs," and it all obviously meant a lot, Brown understood that. Still, a symbolic act like a marriage proposal could have ruined everything. Matthew didn't want that, so instead of going to the jewelry store, he went to the liquor store and bought a nice whiskey. No sooner had they finished the last bottle than a new one appeared on the shelf, and when Graham noticed it, Brown just shrugged and smiled without explaining anything.

Will could only guess what that meant, and he was indeed curious and pleased to observe Matthew, studying his habits and peculiarities. How he bit his lips when he thought or read, how he snapped his fingers many times as he tried to remember something, how he sometimes wrinkled his nose at the tugging pain in his once long ago wounded shoulder after a workout. How his eyes gleam slyly before another flirtation comes off his lips. How gentle he was always around Will, especially adoring taking his hand and kissing it whenever he could, as if his palms weren't covered in calluses and smelled like fish. Matthew, in short, was a desperate romantic, and continues to be so even now that his adoration and idolatry have been taken to a new level, replaced by mutual love with God.

Will didn't doubt him. He trusted him completely, and there was something incredibly satisfying and comforting about it, as if he finally had someone who would never deceive him, never hurt him or anything he cared about. It brought harmony into his life, and Graham's inner demons slept peacefully on the cot beside his bed, embraced by Brown's inner demons, those who Matthew had also tamed.

Gradually he began to want to know more about Matthew's past, though at first he'd thought he could avoid it, and that the subject of the past could simply be a taboo in their house. But he knew that Brown had always wanted to be with someone who could fully understand him, see him. Share his past with him, like they shared a bed. But he didn't push him, didn't spill anything, realizing that Will needed time to calm the frosty winds of his own memories first, just to be able to let the desert wind inside. So Brown revealed himself to him gradually, step by step, one fragment at a time, and Graham was grateful for his patience, and felt the urge to learn more and more.

They lie in bed in the morning, looking at each other, and Will smiles a bit, watching Brown's jaw light up in the golden sun. His gaze suddenly clings to the scar that dissects his lip and chin, and he thinks, and the smile melts from his lips as he feels within himself the desire to finally open that door of his lover's past.

He begins carefully. "Is this scar from your childhood?" he asks, assuming that it could very well be a consequence of that very accident, but still sensing that it isn't, somewhere on an intuitive level.

Judging by the way Matthew responds by first frowning his eyebrows for a moment and then sighing, as if trying to relax, he is right about that. Brown purses his lips, lowering his gaze, before he takes Will's hand gently, touching his skin with his fingertips, as if seeking reassurance. He smiles slightly, though his smile is somewhat sad. "It's a... funny story, actually, considering, um..." he laughs awkwardly. "Nevermind. Anyway, I was about nineteen years old, I guess. It was Halloween, or rather, it was after one Halloween party. I was wearing a sexy nurse costume at the time, of course," Matthew smiles, starting the story a little from afar. "I was a little drunk, very lonely, I'd had a fight with my acquaintances, all in all, the mood was lousy, and I was just wandering through a park all alone in the middle of the night until I ran into a stray dog."

As soon as Brown says these words, Will immediately realizes where this is going, and his eyes widen in shock against his will. “No…”

"I wanted to be friends with it, started approaching to sit by its side, thought about going to the nearest convenience store and buying some sausages or something, but this dog turned out to be... well, not in a good mood, you know?" he continues. "At first it was fine, I thought it was just sniffing me, I sat down next to it, and all of a sudden it pounced. I thought later, while I was treating my wounds, that now I can't even trust dogs, huh. I had a couple more scratches, but they healed. This one didn't... I've been trying to stay away from dogs ever since, just in case. Well, before I came here."

Graham frowned, trying to make sense of what he'd said. Matthew had a bad experience with dogs, he must have been afraid of them, but he never showed it. Hell, he'd even repeated his past bad experience, overcame his fear by getting out of the car and picking up Mulberry from the side of the road! He'd been walking Will's dogs since the first week they'd met! Playing with them! Now he didn't think it was funny when Matthew had been frightened by Max, who had played with him during the walk, and had reflexively hid from him behind a tree. He pretended right away, of course, that he'd just exaggerated his fright for comic effect, to see Will smile, but the fear didn't seem to be so far-fetched. And why had he never said anything to him? Just silently pushing himself over the edge without saying a word to Graham. This seemed insane to Will.

"I know what you're thinking right now," Matthew says again. "But I assure you, it's not that bad. I like your dogs. Besides, I overcame my fear when I picked up Mulberry. I was euphoric when I realized she didn't bite me... in fact, it was even helpful. I'm not afraid of dogs anymore. Almost."

"It's the same as trying to get rid of a phobia of depth by jumping off a cliff into the ocean over and over again alone," Will can't stand it and sits up on the bed, looking down at Brown a little frowningly. "There was no need to hide it from me. I could have helped make things more comfortable for you."

"You did!" Matthew tries to convince him immediately, taking his hands and looking him earnestly in the eye. "You really did, you were helping. Next to you, I'm not afraid of anyone or anything at all, much less your dogs. In fact, they turned out nice! Well, except that time when Rex tried to bite my leg. But I know he didn't mean it, it's okay," he smiles, tilting his

head to the side and looking warmly at Graham. "Will, really, I'm fine," he says his name on purpose to make the words sound even gentler and softer.

Graham looks down at him earnestly, pursing his lips, but still sighs eventually and leans in, kissing Matthew first on the lips and then, quite gently, a little lower, at the site of the scar, and Brown smiles, burrowing his fingers into his hair. "Is there something else you're hiding from me? Confess, you're actually deathly allergic to fish, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, no allergies. But when I was a kid, the girl next door used to chase me around with a bream in her hands. It was terrifying."

Will laughs. "Poor kid. I hope you haven't been left with a deep psychological trauma after that?"

"Still shaking every time I see little girls with fish in their little hands," Matthew replies, and Graham nuzzles into his neck, laughing.

He feels a pleasant warmth of happiness in his chest, which seems to burst out naturally. Smiling, he lifts his head slightly so that his lips rest against Brown's ear. "I love you, Matthew," he says, and sees the man smile broadly as he wraps his arms around his waist.

"I love you, Will," Matthew replies. "And I love our dogs, too."

Graham can't contain himself, so he leans in, kissing Brown on his lovely lips, and for the next hours they stay in bed, snuggling with each other, putting things off just to enjoy each other and their love. It's not until lunchtime that Will goes to fix the boat engines so he can finish his order before dinner, while Matthew does chores around the house: cleaning it, walking the dogs, cooking dinner, and sorting out the mail.

Among the newspapers and advertisements, all of a sudden he notices a strange envelope. Taking it in his hands, he flinches, blinking, and feels his heart quicken for a couple of moments.

It was a letter from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

It was a letter from Hannibal.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was evening. Will was still working on the boat engine; Matthew came to him once to bring him tea and sandwiches, but didn't bother him any more, and most of the time he just sat in the chair in the living room, staring at Hannibal's sealed envelope addressed to Graham. His heart was restless, and he bit his lips and paid no attention to Mulberry approaching him with her favorite toy in her teeth.

He... had no idea what he was supposed to do.

Part of him wanted to tear the envelope into little pieces and burn it so that Graham would never, ever find out about it. It would be easy, and he wouldn't have to worry that Lecter would once again try to get inside his lover's head to overhaul it, removing all the comfort Brown had so carefully created over the months, and replacing it with Art Nouveau style, elegant and empty, with a hint of American Gothic. Because if he let Will know about the letter and read it, he'd probably be frowning again, and Matthew would have to look at the wrinkle between his eyebrows and hear his tired voice, would have to distract him and hear a soft plea for a minute of privacy or something like that instead of his usual laughter. Will would feel bad. Besides, who knows what's in that envelope - a simple postcard or a love letter in the nineteenth-century novel tradition. Maybe he was writing about their shared past, hoping to make Graham sentimental, or maybe he was asking about his present, wondering if he had abandoned his Paris and was willing to go back to his husband already. Either option was awful and had the potential to upset Will and Matthew as well.

He pursed his lips, sighing and looking up at the ceiling. He bites the inside of his cheeks, feeling full of stress. If he decided to save them from this problem by simply destroying the letter, it would mean lying. He would be lying to Will if he did that. A lie for good is still a lie, and if he does end up finding out the truth, Graham won't be able to trust him the way he does now. Matthew seems to have to choose the lesser of two evils, because there is no third option. Either way, there's a danger that he and Will will break up, and their fragile paradise will start to crack like the glass of a car in an accident. He feels his hands shaking slightly as he clutches the letter and exhales heavily, dramatically, covering his eyes with one of his palms, squinting.

He should have just let Hannibal drown. He should have killed him while he had the chance.

Matthew gets up from his chair and walks over to the fireplace. He sighs slowly and carefully puts the letter in the stack with the other mail they've received, then goes up to the bedroom, laying down in bed and pulling the blanket up to his nose as he curls up in a ball.

He waits, like an innocent man waiting for an unjust verdict and having little hope of a mercy.

He just waits.

"Matthew?" Will calls out to him, walking into the house and stroking the dogs tangling under his feet. He can't help but smile at them, but he's a little disturbed by the absence of his biggest fan among his pack. "Matt?" he calls out to him again, but he hears nothing back. Glancing to the side, he notices that the man's shoes and his keys were still there. So he was somewhere in the house. "Are you in the bathroom?" he asks quite loudly as he washes his hands in the sink, but he never hears the answer. He frowns, checking the time again. It was still quite early. Had he fallen asleep while waiting for him? No, normally, even if he did, Will would find him in the living room by the fireplace. Now, as he went there, he didn't see him, but he did see a pile of unopened mail, picking it up right away.

The realization comes with a sudden stab right through his heart, as if someone - *someone* - had made a voodoo doll of him and stabbed it with a needle. Will looks at the envelope in his hands, as if in slow motion, putting the rest of the papers back, and feels his heart begin to beat heavier in his chest. He has an impulsive urge to just go outside and throw it into a barrel and drop a match inside to burn it, so that it would leave nothing but ashes behind, and then he would throw it away to never see it again, to never see any evidence that it was here, in his hands.

And in Matthew's hands.

Graham pursed his lips, glancing toward the bedroom.

The thought flashes through his mind that from now on he'll try to sort through the mail himself. Not to hide anything from Brown, but to keep him from being left with something like this alone with himself and his overwhelming fears; Will understands too well that what his lover fears more than anything else is being alone, losing everything they've gained so far, losing Will. He must not be left alone with this fear. It would have been better if Graham had told him everything post factum and convinced him right away that they're okay.

He sighs and walks off toward the kitchen, where he pulls the whiskey Matthew brought not long ago out of the drawer and pours it into a glass, taking a sip before he sits in the chair. He notices a note about dinner on the fridge, but decides to ignore it. He's not hungry.

Will stares at the envelope for a few more moments, then sets the glass on the table next to him and rips it open, pulling out a folded piece of paper written in that familiar fancy handwriting.

Dear Will,

The kind of a choice you've made. My goodness! You!

Just think of whom you have preferred me to!

Whom did I talk to, humbly, lovingly, one day?

Why did I waste my words of tenderness this way?

Why did you inspire hope in me?

Why didn't you tell me openly

That you had turned the past to fun

And that your memories ignore

All we had felt and said and done?

I'm still feeling as before

And neither travels nor diversions

Have killed my tenderest emotions.

I lived with them through thick and thin…

It's depressing to get information about your life not from first-hand sources, but from Freddie Lounds' vulgar articles, but as long as you keep running from me and pretending that I'm lying in my grave, there's no other option left for me. You've locked me in a box and won't even try to look inside to see how I am. I almost feel abandoned.

You did not die at Hector's hands, and neither did your dear Paris. I am curious as to how that came to be. I know that Agent Munday will soon be confined within the same walls as I am now, but I find it doubtful that I will meet him face to face - it is unlikely that Alana will allow such a thing to happen. That means I have no way of knowing the details of that night. Why didn't you kill him, Will? I saw the picture, his face was covered in blood. Who did this to him - you or Matthew? I hope it was you. After all, you did kill someone like this before, remember?

And if it was Matthew, I'm not surprised he couldn't finish his job. They don't call him Mr. Almost for nothing.

I must confess that I had hoped you would still come to see me soon after that night, but I can be patient. Besides, I have a good imagination - you don't know it, but you and I often talk while sitting by the fireplace this days. In those common rooms of our memory palaces. Do you look into them, or have you barricaded them in the vain hope that you will stop hearing echoes of voices from them? It won't go away if you just ignore it, Will.

I'm curious about the way you and your boy's life is shaping up. What's he like? I memorized him as cocky, but I guess he's different with you. Loyal? That word seems more appropriate. What else did you tell me then? He's not lying to you? I'm curious if he really isn't, or if you're just ignoring the obvious so you don't get hurt again.

I also remember that he doesn't seem to like it when someone upsets you. It must be hard for him.

Why do you really like him that much? I saw him once, and that was enough for me. How can he be worthy of you? It's a mystery that haunts me. What do you see in him? Did I not notice something in him? Indeed, God knows what mystery is hid in him; God knows what you have imagined in him, what his head has never been full of. Perhaps, admiring him, you have given him some of your own divine qualities? It would explain everything.

I'm curious how all this will end, and I'm wondering how soon afterwards you'll come to me. Different foods have different expiration dates, and this one is already too stale on the shelf in your house. The smell of rot can bring in scavengers, Will. Time will come, and you'll see I was right.

You'll get tired of him pretty soon. Until then, as Griboedov wrote,

Just make the most of him. Make him an errand boy,

A sort of a domestic envoy,

A husband who is a page, a husband who is a footman,

The dream of every gentleman...

I have the honor to be your obedient servant,

(though not as obedient as your boy is),

Forever yours,

Hannibal

Will tosses the sheet aside a little impulsively, and Mulberry comes up to sniff it. Graham rubs his face with his palms and, after looking into the void for a while, still gets up and picks up the letter to fold it several times and walk with it outside, putting it on fire and throwing away the ashes. Afterwards he goes to the shower, as if wanting to wash off with cold water not only the sweat from a long day, but also the words he has read, which are already beginning to get under his skin with dirty ink. He really wants to go to Matthew, but decides he must first get rid of Hannibal's shadow behind his back. He washes his hands several times with soap and water to get rid of the intrusive smell of ink on them.

He puts on his underwear and T-shirt and quietly walks into the semi-darkened bedroom. He pauses for a few moments, silently staring at his lover's back, sensing that he is awake. Graham sighs softly and lies down next to him under the covers. Will would be happy to just ignore the elephant in the room, as he has often done before, but he feels that Matthew can't do that - it would only make things worse for him, give fuel to his doubts and fears. He is so afraid of being abandoned again, the way he was once abandoned by his mother. Will looks at him and sees a puppy that wasn't just beaten by past owners; no, he never had an owner at all, wandering the streets alone in both snow and rain, with passersby kicking him and deceiving his trust over and over again. It is almost physically painful.

As he has done with such dogs, he decides to be gentle and cautious. "I know what you're thinking right now, Matthew. I know you have reasons to worry and not trust this whole thing. But I want you to understand that I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving you," he says, and Brown turns around a little awkwardly, staring at him with a complicated look, and Will knows what he's doing, so he smiles softly with sympathy and puts the man's hand over his heart himself. "I won't leave you," he repeats confidently. "You don't have to worry about it."

Matthew smiles a little uncertainly, then licks his lips, lowering his gaze below his eyes.

Graham stares at him for a while, feeling the weight of the silence in his heart. "Matthew, if you see another letter from Hannibal in our mail, just burn it," he says, and Brown looks at him slightly confused. "Don't tell me about it, just light it on fire. Okay?" Will asks, and Matthew examines his face thoughtfully, then nods slowly. "Okay. I don't want to know anything about him, not anymore," he says, and then lifts the finger of his free hand and touches his lips with it, covering his eyes, gesturing for Brown to kiss him right now. The man immediately smiles and gladly obeys, kissing his soft lips, feeling his heartbeat under his palm. Will can't help but smile back.

It was one of those commands he taught him, no matter how it sounded. They could cook together in the kitchen or walk the dogs, go fishing or lie on the couch and watch a movie, and Graham, catching Matthew's amorous gaze, would hint that way for a kiss - touching either his lips or his cheek, and Brown would immediately kiss where he was commanded.

Will felt himself drowning in love, and there was no way he was willing to give it up.

And he really couldn't hear the voices Hannibal wrote about in his letter; they were perfectly drowned out by Matthew's whispers at his ear, and his laughter filling their house, and his voice cheerfully singing along to his favorite song while he was making breakfast for them.

"Will you go to Baltimore with me tomorrow?" Brown asks after some time of their mutual silence, laying his head on his chest while Will strokes his hair.

"You want me to take you to grooming?" Graham asks playfully, pulling back a strand slightly, and Matthew snorts, slapping him jokingly on the belly.

"When I was discharged, I was conditioned to come in after three months for a checkup with Dr. Bloom. So she could see if a psycho like me could be allowed to walk the streets in peace," he rolls his eyes. "I called her last week and we made an appointment for tomorrow afternoon at three. So?"

"Sure," Will replies immediately, then thinks about it. "You lied to her when you were her patient, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't tell her the whole truth," Matthew notes. "When she started running the hospital, she soon spared me from having to talk to my first psychiatrist, who was just terribly boring - and easy to manipulate, I pretended to be a little sicker than I really was, to show over time how much better I was getting. He was easy to fool. But Alana, taking the reins of the hospital, had decided to take over my case personally, just as Chilton had taken

over yours. And she wasn't that easy to fool. I had to... change tactics a little, put on a different mask," he suddenly snorts. "I think during our first session, she just wanted to understand for herself why I really did it. It was like she accidentally called out your name in the session, and I reacted like Pavlov's dog. It was very eloquent."

Will smiles, stroking his hair. "What exactly happened?"

Matthew thinks the idea of replacing the cages in the visitation hall with something resembling a fish tank with a few holes for proper air circulation is pretty weird. But it's not for him to kink-shame the new head of this far-from-five-star hotel. She must have been prompted to do so by the memory of her visits to Will, when she had to look at him constantly through the bars of his cage, as if he were not a man, but a rabid dog about to be put down. It had its own logic - a great reminder to visitors and psychiatrists of the dangerousness of the patients - but it was not universal and seemed to disgust Bloom.

Brown sighed, finally stopping his gaze on the woman a few steps away. She has changed. Strict hairstyle. Dark lipstick. An expensive suit. Marriage fits her, that's for sure. Matthew smirks. "Are you going to ask me about my rough childhood in the orphanage, or are we going to go straight to how I tried to kill your ex-boyfriend?" he doesn't sound smug or too cocky when he says it; his voice is tired because it would really be a tiring prospect to scroll through childhood memories in his head again, spitting out pathetic crumbs of information to the person he is talking to just to avoid being perceived as uncooperative.

"What would you like to talk about?" she asks, keeping her curious professional gaze on him.

He smiles, chuckling quietly. "How nice of you to ask that, Dr. Bloom. Showing warmth to a poor, lonely pup who has no visitors, who has no one to talk to but you..."

"You had one visitor slightly over a year ago," she remarks calmly. "The visitation records mention Will Graham's name."

Matthew feels as if he's been shot again, the air running out of his lungs for a moment, as if he were in a vacuum. He straightens his back, his gaze flicking around for a couple of seconds before he focuses his attention on the woman. He desperately tries to keep his face, but he knows from the look in her eyes that she's managed to notice him losing control for a few moments. It's as if a gust of wind blew the mask off his face, and he deftly caught it and put it back on. It might have escaped her attention if she had turned away, distracted by something at that moment, but she was not. Brown swallowed, staring at her like a hawk being attacked by another large bird: eager to maintain pride and show strength, but with a note of anxiety given off by the gleam in his eyes and his heartbeat quickening. "Yes. Slightly over a year ago, as you correctly noted."

Alana squints slightly, swinging her leg, pondering something, as if trying to calculate in her head the equation the professor had written on the board. "You never admitted to the court that he was the one who encouraged you to try to kill Hannibal."

"Because he didn't," Brown quickly replies.

They stare at each other for about half a minute, and then she smirks slightly. "Right," she says, and they both know that's not true, and they're both fine with it. "But you tried to do it for him. And you killed the bailiff for him."

"I was a little out of my mind at the time, Dr. Bloom," he smiles, looking into her eyes. Then he averts his gaze and bites his lip, as if trying to convince himself to calm down.

"Will never talked about you," Alana remarks, as if throwing a dart at his body, but he doesn't flinch this time, only clutching his hands for a moment before looking at her again. "How does that make you feel?"

His gaze is a hurricane in the night woods. He suddenly rises from his chair and places his hands in the rounded breathing holes at the level of his neck, squeezing the edges. "I believe Mr. Graham has every right not to talk about me, not to remember about me, and not to think about me. And I feel I am lucky to be at least a page in the book of his life, over which he ran his eyes cursorily before flipping," he says calmly. "And yet I find it mean that you chose to tell me this to see how I would react. What did you expect? That I would get really angry? Cry? I don't cry on the first date, Dr. Bloom," he chuckles.

"If you were angry or crying, I'd think you were trying to trick me, Mr. Brown," she sighs, leaning back in her chair. "You're not the kind of person who usually lets his emotions run wild. That's why your body and mind react so sensitively at any mention of Will. You're used to holding yourself back, but when I say his name out loud, you become like that dog that tries to break its chain and run toward its master whose shadow has just been seen on the horizon." Alana keeps her eyes on him, watching him tense his whole body as the mocking smile disappears from his face. "From everything I know about you, from what I've heard from the orderlies and doctors I've interviewed, you're never really you, and you prefer to wear the mask of a lunatic, or a jester, or a suffering kid, or an ordinary person, adding subtle details to your person-suit just to enjoy the fact that no one even notices them. In front of your past psychiatrist, you were an awkward young man with memory lapses and a terrible fear of cats. In front of the orderlies, you're a menacing psycho who loves dark humor and hates to be touched. In court, you tried hard to look like a nervous religious paranoid. And yet in all this variability there is one constant: your reaction to Will Graham. The bell rings, the dog starts to salivate. Even if the bowl is empty."

Matthew clenches his jaw tightly, tensing his whole body, and shakes his head a bit. He licks his parched lips, looking directly at Bloom, and then suddenly smiles a little. "Ouch," he says, touching his chest with the palm of his hand. "You cut a man to the quick, just like your ex loved."

He knew it wouldn't hurt her. Still, he couldn't help it.

She didn't react with anything but a polite smile.

Matthew smiles, feeling Will's heartbeat and his calm breathing.

He already anticipates the sense of victory and pride he will feel as he enters the hospital building with him.

Part of him only wishes Hannibal could witness his triumph.

Chapter End Notes

In his letter, Hannibal quotes one of the possible translations of the "Woe from Wit" by Griboedov.

Chapter 15

Matthew stands by the closet for a long time, wondering what he should wear to his therapist's appointment to look in the most adequate way, though it's not like that's a challenge for him. Still, he takes some time to make up his mind and grab one of Will's plaid shirts from the rack, the one that matches his green eyes perfectly. He inhales its scent and then smirks as he puts it on and glances in the mirror. He thinks it looks funny on him, because it clearly isn't his style - Brown has preferred white clothes ever since he was in medical school, it made him feel like if he could keep his clothes perfectly white, his life wasn't too fucked up yet. This obsession with white came back to him especially after he got out of prison, where he had to wear an ugly orange suit and his clothes were never perfectly clean even after a laundry day.

But he liked Will's shirt. It gave him that nice sense of possessiveness that made him want to purr. And even though he didn't button it up, wearing it more like a cape over a white tank top, he felt satisfied. Smiling to himself in the mirror, Matthew finally leaves the bedroom and goes downstairs.

Graham is already waiting for him outside, standing with his back against the car door. Seeing Brown, he arches an eyebrow, and the man's smile only gets wider and more satisfied. Matthew spreads his arms as if to show himself in all his glory, twisting around his axis once. "Do you think I look mentally stable enough?"

"You look like a jerk," Will says, but Brown smiles, coming close enough to hover over Will, leaning one hand on the car door.

"Well, I am *your* jerk," Matthew remarks, and the man doesn't hold back and smiles, averting his gaze. He raises his hand and touches his lips with his finger, and Brown kisses him quite slowly, prolonging his pleasure, until Will pushes him gently away, reminding him that they might be late if they don't leave right away, because someone has been showing off in front of the mirror for too long before going out. Brown snorts and shows him his tongue, putting on sunglasses and getting into the passenger seat.

It isn't until they park outside the hospital and get out of the car that Matthew notices that Will seems a little tense. The way he looks around suggests one possible reason - he's afraid of running into Freddie Lounds' camera again. And while Brown doesn't see what the problem is with what the tabloids write about them if they don't talk to anyone but each other anyway, he also catches himself thinking that he doesn't want the redheaded journalist sticking her little nose into their relationship again. For that reason alone, he does not take Will's hand, just in case, and walks quickly with him to the hospital building. "There's some therapeutic effect in this, you know," he remarks, only to distract Graham. "When you're able to walk into that place and then just as calmly walk out. Gives you a sense of normality."

"Normal people don't go to places like this," Will says a little grimly.

Matthew snorts, opening the door for him. "Well, you're not the one who is here for the psychological evaluation," he remarks, and Graham snorts.

Will watches Brown walking quietly beside him, and can't help but remember the sound of the keychain twirling around his finger, the sound by which he used to recognize the man when he approached his cell. He wondered if it was part of his image of the harmless orderly, whose presence was always betrayed by this noisy habit, or if he was doing it not quite consciously. He doesn't have time to ask Matthew about it, because his thoughts are immediately disrupted when he sees Dr. Chilton at the other end of the corridor.

Brown sees him, too, and suddenly the cheerfulness returns to him. He just stops with Will outside Alana's office and gently pokes Graham in the side with his elbow to get the man to look at him. After getting his attention, he walks over to a nearby chair and leans unobtrusively on its armrest, like on a low cane, and makes the same face with which he made Will laugh that first night. He is laughing now, though he tries in vain to hide it, and this inevitably attracts Frederick's attention.

The doctor turns around at them, stopping to speak to the psychiatrist they do not know, and raises his eyebrows, clearly surprised to see Will in this place. Then he notices Brown smiling at Graham, and the surprise strikes him again. Then he suddenly remembers something, and it is reflected on his face with an expression of amused curiosity, and he, after saying a quick goodbye to his companion, heads toward them. Will could have stopped smiling to scare him off with his disgruntled face, but he doesn't, feeling the wave of amusement emanating from Brown and inevitably being infected by it. "Hello, Frederick," he says calmly.

"Hello, Will," the man says in his usual nervously relaxed voice, behind which he tries to hide his curiosity. He smiles tautly, casting glances at Brown. "Matthew. So it's true? You two..."

His former employee smirks as if he's the only one who knows the joke. "Dr. Chilton, and you're still the same gossip," he shakes his head with a smile.

Frederick hums. "You know, I talk to Hannibal quite often, since I'm writing a book about him," he says this, and Will holds back a chuckle, "and I can assure you that he is the biggest gossip in this building. Mr. Graham has always been his favorite topic of conversation, but ever since rumors of your affair leaked out to the world through Freddie Lounds, he's been so ridiculously trying to pretend that he doesn't care about any of this at all that it's just comical. Thanks to you, Matthew, I have something I can say back to him in response to his taunts. One mention of you and Will, and he shuts up like I slapped him in the face. I'm grateful."

Brown smirks. Graham doesn't share his pleasure, sighing irritably. "Frederick, playing games with Hannibal won't do you any good. I don't want to insult you, of course, but you're a worthless manipulator, very easy to control and damn easy to fool."

Dr. Chilton snorts. "That's not true."

Matthew and Will raise their right eyebrows almost simultaneously. Brown smiles cheerfully. "Dr. *Ch*ilton, I'm really, really *s*orry to up*s*et you," he lisped deliberately, and then smirked,

switching back to his normal voice, even adding a slight hoarseness to it, "but you're so damn easy to fool."

Frederick purses his lips, straightening up as if to take a defensive pose, glaring at one man and then at another, and it's really saving him that Dr. Bloom opens her office door, drawing all the attention to herself. The woman looks them over in silence, raising her eyebrows slightly, and then still stops her gaze on Chilton. "Dr. Chilton, isn't it already your time to see Hannibal?" she prompts, and the man nods hurriedly, smiling awkwardly at Will and Matthew.

"Yes. Right," he says, "if you'll excuse me, I really must be going."

Graham grins without joy. "Run. He doesn't like his patients to be late for their appointments," he notes caustically, and Chilton's smile is replaced by a tense expression as he walks away down the corridor.

Matthew looks at Will, helplessly in love. He touches his shoulder again to get the man to look at him. "I like it when you scare people."

"That's... not something you should voice before you go to your psych eval," Graham remarks, but Brown only smiles broadly, happy as his dogs on a walk. He finally forces himself to look away from Will and glances at Alana, greeting her with a nod of his head and slipping through the door to the office, which has been opened for him. The woman stays outside, and Will awkwardly clears his throat. "Sorry."

"Oh, that's okay, I love it when Margot scares other people, too. She's very good at it - she can do a perfectly menacing cold queen face" Alana says with a soft smile, and Graham chuckles awkwardly. "He put your shirt on. Brought you here. I'm surprised there are no hickeys on either of you - he's clearly passionate about letting everyone know who he belongs to."

Will sees no point in denying it. "If you're interested in my opinion, I'm sure he's not going to kill anybody. He's not a danger to society and he's not crazy," he says calmly and convincingly.

"As long as you keep him on a leash, yes, I have no doubt," Alana says, sighing. "But what happens when you untie him from you?"

"I'm not going to do that," Will replies without delay, shaking his head. "Alana, I think I'm..." he wants to say it, but he fails. He bites his lip, lowering his gaze, and already mentally notes, out of habit, how fast his heart suddenly starts to beat.

"Ignoring the worst in him in order to continue enjoying the best?" Bloom guesses.

Graham shakes his head with his eyes closed and sighs. "I don't ignore the worst in him. His level of worst is fine for me. I enjoy everything."

"He killed for you," there's no accusation in that, she just reminds him to get his opinion.

Will sighs again and just shrugs, not knowing what to say to that. "It's honestly not the worst thing anyone's ever done to me," he jokes as he sits down in his chair.

Alana looks at him for a few more moments with the attentive doctor's gaze. "You know, it was largely my decision to let him out of here," she remarks, and Will looks up at her, listening. "I... had some grounds for suspecting he'd come to you."

Graham blinks a couple of times when it suddenly gets to him. "You let him out... for me?"

Bloom smiles softly, looking into his confused face. "Perhaps it's part of my plan to alienate you from Hannibal. Does that make you angry?"

Will opens his mouth, looking away a bit, and then closes it. His eyebrows are still slightly raised in surprise. He shakes his head. "No," he answers, then hums and smiles weakly, looking at Alana again. "I assume then that this session is just a formality, and I don't have to worry about having to somehow explain to the dogs tonight where their favorite boy vanished to?"

"It's not a formality. It's my desire to make sure I haven't made a terrible mistake, Will," she says softly and sighs. "But it looks like you can relax," she says nonetheless, giving him a reassuring smile, and walks into her office.

She closes the door behind her and, using her cane as elegantly as if she could dance with it if she wished, walks to her chair. Matthew watches her with a lazy glance, smirking softly, confident that he has made an impression and managed to deliver the message. "Are you going to show me those ink stains and ask me what I see in them?"

"I doubt you'll see anything new in them now, your vision hasn't changed much since the last time we did it," Alana notices, looking up at him calmly.

Brown remembers that session well. He'd always thought the Rorschach test was a hyped-up nonsense, but looking at the spots then, he felt their strange effect on himself. He saw the dog drinking from the creek. He saw him and Will sitting across from each other in the visiting room. He saw hawks circling over their prey. He saw Hannibal crucified before his eyes. He didn't talk about it all out loud, lying, saying he saw a butterfly, a crab, or the skin of a bear - but Bloom certainly saw that he saw something connected to his idol. Perhaps just as he saw in Hannibal's dilated pupils the answer to the treasured question. She, too, had been deceived, Matthew thought at the time. Deceived cruelly. After a deception like that, you change. He knows that.

"Tell me how your adaptation is going, Matthew," she asks, looking at him coolly, tilting her head slightly to the side.

Brown grins. He licks his lips. "Well, I didn't kill anybody, if that's what you mean. I could have, even two - and that would have been pure self-defense. But I didn't," he remarks with a perfectly smug smile. "Not that I qualify for a medal for that, of course, but I think this is a good thing to start my... adaptation story."

She looks at him calmly, taking this information into account. "What about your routine?"

He snorts. "You know about my routine, I live with Will and annoy him almost 24 hours a day. But he doesn't complain," Matthew smirks, but, realizing that Alana needs to hear more to evaluate him, he sighs and leans back in his chair, throwing his head back and looking up at the ceiling. "I don't even know what to say. We have dogs. We got our eighth one together. Mulberry. We also go fishing together sometimes..." he pauses, trying to figure out what information he can voice. What else do normal people do? Work? "At the moment I'm just basically his housewife. Cooking, helping with the dogs, keeping him from dying of boredom."

"Would you like to get a job?" she asks.

"Mehhh... That would mean I'd have to see Will less often, and that prospect seems pretty lame to me," Brown replies, then looks at her with a smirk. "Oops. That was the wrong answer. But you still wouldn't have believed me if I'd said something else. And I figured you valued honesty more than correctness," he shrugs.

"Any honest answer is the correct answer in our situation," Bloom says and sighs. "Your feelings for Will are addiction multiplied by religious bigotry. Your personal god heard your prayers and gave you what you craved and more. It can make you lose your mind," she looks at him carefully, as if trying to see beneath the water column an earring that has fallen to the bottom. "What are your expectations about your future now?"

Matthew shrugs, smiling serenely. "We're going to go swimming this summer. Will suggested it," he feels a pleasant warmth inside as he says this. "I think we'll celebrate my birthday together in November somehow cool, and then, oh boy, Christmas, then his birthday... I think we might happen to get another dog by then. And I'd like to take a vacation somewhere warm in the winter this time, maybe at least for a couple of weeks. Will you keep an eye on the dogs if anything? I don't think we can take all eight of them to Florida. Or wherever he agrees to go, I haven't discussed it with him yet," he could talk about it forever, but decides that some plans are better left in his head. Brown immediately thinks of the jewelry store and how he'd like to find the perfect ring for Will, how he'd like to propose to him... it might be best to do it at Christmas, he thinks, and smiles at his thoughts. Under the mistletoe - he'll hang it up while Graham can't see it, and then catch him under it and kiss him, and then kneel before the man in the supreme act of his adoration.

Alana tilts her head to the side, looking intently at him, and Matthew knows that gesture well enough - she's about to say something that could potentially cut him. Not a stab to the heart, but the slight slip of a knife on his finger as he cooks. He mentally prepares himself, but not enough. "What about Hannibal?"

It doesn't feel like a knife to the finger, but more like a burn from a red-hot cookware. The smile disappears from his face and he kneads his neck a little, biting his lips, averting his gaze. He gives himself a few seconds to sound not too rude, but he fails. "Hannibal is in prison, and I sincerely hope he continues to be here. It seems to be your responsibility to ensure that."

"I can keep him here physically, but his influence against my will is capable of seeping through even the smallest cracks in the concrete," she says. "I know he keeps writing him letters."

"Yes, we agreed not to read them anymore," Matthew answers immediately, sighing, looking out the window. "Will suggested it, and I'm grateful to him for that," he adds hastily, and they look at each other in silence before he leans forward a little sharply, clutching the armrests of his chair a little. "Dr. Bloom, I assure you, I am willing to plug all sorts of holes in the house to avoid this man coming back into Will's life. And I hope you're on my side in this."

"Oh, I'm on your side. I can feel that my family and I are safe only as long as he is locked in his cell. He promised to kill me years ago, and he keeps his promises. Only his willingness to do it with his own hands and no one else's keeps my life and my peace," she says. "And I'm extremely interested in making sure that this madness that you and Will call love isn't terminated, because otherwise, I'm afraid Will might do a terribly stupid thing, turning down a slippery slope, and feeding himself pomegranate seeds."

She finishes speaking and the room falls silent. Matthew looks at her intently, feeling a slight tension in the air, frowning slightly, analyzing her motives and body language.

"I hope we understand each other, Matthew?" Alana asks, and he leans back in his chair, looking at the woman in front of him with interest, beginning to understand what she is doing.

"I think so," he says thoughtfully.

Bloom is slightly tense and keeps her stern gaze on him, the kind one sees in a bird protecting its chick. "Don't. You dare. Mess up," she says, hammering out every word as if she were hammering nails, and the strange sensation of having such a truly protective mother around makes Matthew's childhood trauma prickle unpleasantly inside, and he presses his lips together, tensing up. Bloom sighs, looking away. "You can go," she says, opening a desk drawer to pull out some papers.

Brown obediently rises, still staring at her thoughtfully. "I won't mess up," he says confidently but softly, and then turns around, leaving her office.

Alana looks after him, silently cherishing the hope that she has bet on the right horse.

Chapter 16

After his meeting with Will and Matthew, Frederick felt a little nervous, and as he walked to the right section accompanied by the orderly, he adjusted his tie, licked his lips, and clenched his jaw, holding back the urge to scratch the old scar on his face that had been hidden by several layers of makeup. He skips over the routine instruction he has learned by heart at this point, nodding hastily at the young man in the white coat, inadvertently remembering how Brown once wore a similar one and, up to his elbows in blood, roamed freely around his hospital. This makes Chilton flinch, but his attention is immediately diverted by the opening doors. He nods awkwardly to the orderly once more and then walks toward the prisoner, looking at him warily from fifteen paces away and waiting a couple of moments before still forcing himself to overcome seven more and stand a decent distance away, never taking his eyes off the figure in the funny white suit for a moment. "Dr. Lecter," he greets, his voice slightly strained.

Hannibal sits at his desk, drawing something, as usual, with an expression of calm concentration on his face, pale from the lack of sunlight. "Hello, Frederick," he says quietly, not bothering to look up. Chilton reminds himself that they are separated by a rather solid wall, and steps closer, regaining his confidence. Lecter takes a couple more moments to apply one stroke after another to the white sheet of paper, adding detail to the beloved image from Botticelli's painting. He focuses slightly on his sense of smell, expecting to detect the familiar scent of makeup, expensive cologne, and the medications the man has been forced to take to maintain his well being after everything that has befallen him in the past ten years, when he suddenly freezes. Hannibal picks up the familiar scent of cheap shower gel, of aftershave with a ship on the bottle, of a pack of dogs and fast-food fries in his scent. He frowns his eyebrows slightly, almost imperceptibly, and then raises a remotely interested glance at Chilton. "How's Will?" he asks in a completely calm voice, as if wondering about the health of a long-forgotten classmate.

Frederick would be surprised at how ubiquitous Dr. Lecter is, but he already knows this trick of his, so he only snorts mockingly, looking at him directly and confidently. "Just amazing, as far as I can tell. He was smiling when I saw him. Can you imagine that? Smiling! Almost giggling!" he chuckles. "I never would’ve thought that, of all of us, *he* would become a real living example that life after the Ripper exists."

"I think you'd be surprised at how many people are actually willing to giggle at you. It's not that hard, Frederick," he smirks playfully.

Chilton would feel vulnerable if he didn't know that actually, right now, he's looking at a man who has lost on all fronts. "Oh, Hannibal, you don't fool me. I can only imagine how pissed off you are that someone took baby Will away from your unhealthy influence. Nobody likes it when outsiders interfere in an experiment," he says and smiles. "You know, it's so funny to realize that some insignificant action of yours in the past has attracted such momentous consequences. I brought them together without even knowing it. I picked a random orderly out of a pile of them. I think, in a way, I'm the reason Will has what he has now - and you don't have what you don't have." Frederick feels smug, feels victorious. "I wonder if I'll be

invited to the wedding. Though it's unlikely... well, whatever. Spread the love, I suppose," he smirks.

Hannibal still has the same slight smile on his face, but his gaze is as dark as an alleyway in the dead of night, walking past which you sense the presence of a maniac with a knife ready to pounce on you at any moment. "Your tongue has only gotten more appetizing over the years, Frederick."

Chilton flinches, but very quickly regains his collected and smug attitude. "Well, luckily for me, you're in no position to do anything to anyone," he declares, and then squints for a moment, a spark of interest gleaming in his eyes for a few moments. "I don't know what game you were going to play when you turned yourself in to the police, Hannibal, but it looks like Mr. Brown not only knocked all the pieces off the game board, but also seduced the only man who was in your eyes worthy enough to play with," he smirks. "No chess for you, Dr. Lecter. You can certainly try to use your fertile imagination and play with yourself, but what fun would that be, right?"

Hannibal smiles gently, imagining piercing Chilton's severed tongue with a thin stick and shoving it into the boiling water. "What is Will doing here?" he wonders.

Chilton shrugs his shoulders, averting his gaze idly, contemplating the paradoxically good interior of this place. If it were up to him, he'd keep this monster in an entirely different environment. "Matthew is passing his stability test, I suppose. Will seems to be a very caring boyfriend."

"It's quite natural for Will. The owner wants to be there for his dog while the vet examines it."

Frederick laughs, looking at Hannibal again. "Tell me, do you want to eat Matthew?" he asks curiously.

Lecter smirks slightly. "I don't eat dogs, Frederick. I think it would be rather humane to just put him to sleep."

Chilton snorts. "If Mr. Graham could hear you now, he'd be furious," he remarks as the door behind him suddenly opens and the same orderly with long dark hair, slightly curly and disheveled, enters the room. His dark green eyes are almost fixed on the floor as he announces that visiting hours are over for the day. Looking at his pallor and thinness, Frederick involuntarily wonders if Hannibal whenever he looks at this young man feels the urge to fatten him up as an overly thin pig that is unfit for food. He hums at his thoughts and looks at the cannibal again. "I haven't enjoyed our conversations that much in a long time. I think I should send Matthew a bottle of good whiskey and a thank-you note. As an act of admiration - after all, he managed to make the Ripper feel like a fallback," he smirks. *"At best,"* Chilton stabs one last needle into him before turning around and walking away, feeling satisfied and not noticing the orderly's tense gaze staring directly at his back.

Lecter wonders if it's time for him to finally send Matthew a note too.

When Will returns to the house in the late evening, having finished his work on the boat motors, he feels the pleasant warmth of the fireplace from the living room and hears music playing, apparently from Matthew's phone - their record player broke again recently, so they had to make do until Brown could find the time to take care of it. Graham looks around at the pile of dogs sleeping sweetly after their walk and dinner and can't help but smile at this heavenly sight. He takes off his jacket and goes in search of Matthew, just in time to see him coming down the stairs to the first floor. The man smiles when he sees him, taking off his disposable gloves, which are covered in white paint. A couple more stains are visible on Brown's naked torso, and Will quickly runs his eyes over them, then stares into Matthew's face again, arching an eyebrow questioningly.

"Guess who finally patched the bullet holes in our bedroom door," Matt replies proudly to the unvoiced question, spreading his arms as if to show off.

Will smirks softly. "You mean you finally got that stupid poster off that door?" he teases.

"Oh yeah, it's hanging next to the mirror now."

Graham laughs, and Matthew, throwing out his tainted gloves, finally walks over to him with a glass of whiskey, prepared in advance for his arrival home. Will thanks him with a nod of his head, sitting down on the couch and finally relaxing. He should probably take a shower after such a long day, but first he just wants to chill out, reminding himself that he's not alone anymore, that his loneliness has been brightened up for months now by more than just dogs. That feeling warms him up better than whiskey.

Brown walks over to the table, picks up his phone and turns up the music a little louder. The song just changes to a new one, and Will hears a beautiful woman singing, slow, lingering, like honey on a hot day. He casts a glance at Brown, who smirks slyly before putting the phone back down.

Everything is fine now

Let's sleeping dog's lay

All our minds made up now

All our beds are made

Matthew takes a sip from his glass, looking at Will with those sparks, and Graham arches an eyebrow questioningly, asking nothing aloud. He has long since stopped questioning his partner's varied musical tastes and his particular weakness for love songs. Brown places a glass on the shelf by the fireplace and suddenly holds out his hand to his lover. "Would you do me the honor of a dance?" he asks in his flirtatious, husky tone.

"No, no way," Graham laughs, shaking his head, but Matthew purposely makes the face of a battered, upset dog, looking at him with his beautiful green eyes full of warm love, and Will

feels himself giving up too shamefully quickly under this pressure. "No, this is silly, I'm not dancing."

"Please," he smiles softly, disarming him by continuing to hold out his hand. "You'll like it, I promise," Brown tilts his head slightly to the side, keeping his amorous gaze on him.

Graham sighs very heavily, but it only makes the man chuckle quietly. Will finishes the rest of the whiskey in his glass in a gulp and places it on the table, finally standing up and accepting the outstretched hand; Matthew immediately pulls him insistently closer, gently wrapping one arm around his waist, beginning to sway slightly to the melodious voice of Lana Del Rey. The smile never leaves his face as he admires the marvelous warmth reflected in his lover's face, feeling like the happiest man in the world.

'Cause you're my religion

You're how I'm living

Hearing these lines, Will laughs, feeling his cheeks blush pleasantly; Matthew makes no comment, continuing to smile even as Graham expectantly begins to avoid eye contact out of embarrassment. "You like it," Brown does not ask, but affirms, grinning even more contentedly, and then, without waiting for a verbal response, slides one of his hands to his face, covering his bristling cheek - not to make Will look him in the eye, but simply to show his tenderness, his affection for him, seeing the happy curve of his lips as a reward.

When all my friends say I should take some space

Well I can't envision that for a minute

When I'm down on my knees, you're how I pray

Matthew leans forward slightly, pulling the man closer, almost feeling his heartbeat with his own chest, and they touch foreheads with their eyes closed. They continue to sway gently to the beat of the song, until Will still shortens that little distance between them, kissing Brown's lips. He feels with all his heart this love between them.

Hallelujah I need your love

Hallelujah I need your love

Matthew caresses his mouth with his tongue, feeling the heat spreading through his body, one hand sliding under Will's shirt to slowly pull it off him, to finally touch him skin-to-skin, when suddenly they hear the loud vibrating of a cell phone. Brown instinctively presses Graham harder towards his waist, and as the man breaks off their kiss, Matthew tilts his head back, moaning sorely. "Worst timing ever," he complains, not wanting to let Will leave him, definitely not when he's so soft in his arms, definitely not in such a romantic moment.

Graham sighs, actually feeling not particularly pleased by the fact that someone has decided to call him either - but it happens rarely enough for the rudiments of anxiety to have already

settled in him in these few moments. He pulls away from Matthew, smiling at him awkwardly, and the latter, with a sigh, turns down the music.

Will looks at the caller's name and wants to curse, but holds back, just picking up the phone. "What's wrong, Jack?" he asks, and Brown, hearing this name, immediately tenses, looking at Graham carefully, as if trying not to miss the slightest emotion on his face.

"Heard anything about the Bloody Tarologist?"

"Jack, I'll hang up," Graham warns in a tired voice, rubbing his face with the palm of his hand.

"He's got another victim, this time it's Chilton," Jack says before Will can fulfill his promise. The man is confused, blinking several times, and his silence prompts the FBI agent to continue. "Frederick is alive. By a miracle - well, as always. But he's in a coma. The attempt was made a couple of hours ago when he was returning from the hospital, where he had talked with Hannibal. He was found near dumpsters outside an expensive liquor store. It was all in the Tarologist's M.O. - the poison had been squirted through a syringe directly into his neck and then he was left there, with a card stuffed in his mouth. Chilton was lucky that the cocktail of drugs he'd been taking for the past couple of years hadn't allowed the poison to work the way the killer had hoped. Lucky son of a bitch."

Matthew continues to stare intently into Will's face as he listens to Crawford. "What... what do you want from me, Jack?" Graham asks.

"I want you to help us find him. I think he might have something to do with Hannibal - it can't be just a coincidence, no matter what kind of a maniac magnet Chilton is," Jack says. "I know what you're going to say - don't hang up on me, please. I swear I won't ask you to see Lecter. Just come to the lab. Look at the crime scene photos, the bodies - I don't know, I'm willing to give you whatever you need. We haven't been able to get even one step closer to that son of a bitch for a month now."

Will is silent, staring at the floor, and Brown notices the way he bites his lip, sees the intense thinking process and even the fleeting spark of a desire to just hang up. He also sees the painful realization that if Hannibal really is behind this, sooner or later this Bloody Tarologist will come to them, destroying their paradise with his dark magic and bloody hands.

He exhales heavily, closing his eyes, resigning himself to the inevitable. "I'll be there tomorrow morning."

Matthew presses his lips together, feeling the clouds thickening over their house.

"Good. Thank you, Will. We'll be waiting," Crawford says, clearly not surprised that Graham accepted the job despite all his distaste for it. He knew too well what to push to get him to do what was necessary - necessary for both others and himself.

Will hangs up, still avoiding looking at Brown. Matthew is silent for a while, and then he sighs heavily, turning off the music altogether, and then comes up to him, hugging him gently from the back, warming him with his body. "Tomorrow morning," he echoes his words. "In

the meantime, we still have plenty of time. Just you and me. And... chocolate cereal and whiskey for dinner," he says, and Graham chuckles weakly. Matthew smiles. "Oh yes. Stop, moment, you are wonderful."

Will sighs, covering his palm on his belly with his own. "It feels like sand flowing out of my fingers, no matter how hard I try to hold it in my palms," he says quietly. "I can almost hear it crumbling at my feet in handfuls of ashes."

Matthew rests his chin on his shoulder, tilting his head, wistfully silent. Finally he sighs and smiles again. "How about we turn the sand into concrete and build our impregnable fortress, through which neither devils nor angels nor men can sneak?" he offers and Graham hums with a smile. "That's it," Brown kisses his cheek, squeezing him tighter in his arms for a few moments before still pulling away. "Then you take a shower and I'll get the cement."

Will watches with a smile as Brown removes the empty glasses and pulls the chocolate cereal out of the drawer. Looking back at Graham, the man shakes the rustling bag with a smile, and Will laughs before biting his lip in thoughtfulness. He realizes that the sand keeps leaking from his fingers, and that he wants to make the most of what this moment offers him. "Maybe you want to come with me tomorrow?" he offers as calmly as possible.

Matthew looks up, accidentally spilling milk past the bowl, and then smiles. "Of course I want to! But won't Jack just kick me out of there as soon as he sees me?" he asks.

Graham shrugs. "Well, if he does, I'll walk out of there with you, and he'll be left with nothing. He'll have to compromise if he really wants me to do this whole thing," he says, and Brown smiles contentedly. "And I hope it tastes better than cement," notes Will jokingly, pointing to the cereal.

"I swear it's better than anything they serve in those fancy restaurants in the heart of the Baltimore," Brown assures him, and Graham, with a chuckle, only nods as he leaves for the shower.

He watched the water wash the dirt and sand off him and couldn't shake the twisting feeling in his stomach that there was less and less sand in his palms.

Chapter 17

"What the hell is he doing here?"

Will stares nonchalantly at Jack, perfectly prepared for that kind of reaction. Matthew beside him smiles calmly, confident that Graham won't let agent just send him away. "Emotional support. I'm not going to dip my head into someone else's blood all by myself again, Jack."

"Will-"

"Either he comes with me or I leave, Jack," Graham says in a tired voice. Crawford clenches his jaw. "I can vouch for him," Will convinces the man, and Jack, though openly showing his distrust for this idea, still lets both of them into the lab. Matthew smiles victoriously, looking around with curiosity.

When they go inside, Brown sees two men near the corpse. The younger one is studying the report, writing something down at the other man's dictation as he finishes the autopsy. Hearing the door open, they both look up. "Will! So good to see you!" Price is genuinely happy to see him, and only then notices Matthew standing behind, immediately becoming somewhat lost, as does his partner.

They had seen each other before, the night Hector came to kill the two of them. But then they'd been on their turf, and now it was the other way around, and Brown seemed like an outsider, a stain on a white coat that one desperately wanted to scrub off with soap and water so there wouldn't be even a trace of it left. Matthew isn't the least bit offended or embarrassed by this, and just smiles affably, extending his hand for a proper greeting. "Hi, I'm Matthew."

Zeller clutches the clipboard in his hands somewhat frightened, and Price pauses slightly awkwardly for a moment before waving his hand uncertainly. "My hands are pretty bloody, sorry."

"It's okay, mine too," Brown smiles carelessly, but never getting a friendly gesture in return, he understandably puts his hands in his pockets.

Brian can't seem to stand it. "Okay, hold on, isn't it legally forbidden for him to be in here, or am I missing something?" he asks, interrupting the awkward silence.

Matthew just smirks, shrugging his shoulders. Will sighs. "I'm here to look at the bodies and the reports on the Tarologist's victims," he changes the subject, and Brian and Jimmy immediately nod simultaneously, stepping away from the body. Zeller opens a few lockers and pulls out three others one by one.

"So, the first victim is Lara Johnson, 24 years old. Worked as a prostitute, was found in her own van in a semi-abandoned parking lot," Brian says. "Cause of death was poisoning, via an injection through the needle of a medical syringe directly into her neck. There were no signs of resistance and death occurred within a couple of minutes. There were also traces of sedatives in her blood, which may indicate that she had taken sleeping pills several hours

before her death. There are signs of self-harm and violence on her body - but not that this is anything unique or directly related to the murder, given where she worked..."

"And our maniac's calling card, a tarot card, was found right in her mouth," Price enters with enthusiasm. "The Tower, to be specific. It's a very curious one, it means catastrophe, change - it's interesting that the Tarologist seems to have decided to start with this particular card. Something about giving up the normal self and transitioning..."

Brian stops the flow of his speech with a gesture of his palm, then looks at Will. "He never heard anything about tarot before these murders, and now he's just creepy hyperfixated," he snorts, and Jimmy rolls his eyes. "Well, anyway, that's it with this girl. Over here we have the lovers," he stops between the two bodies, a man and a woman.

"Although their card was different - well, his," Price counters again. "The Devil. Lust, addiction - classic."

"He was one of the guards at the hospital," Zeller emphasize, looking at Will.

"I remember him," Matthew smirks, once again drawing the attention of everyone around to himself. "He's been working there for years, back when I was an orderly. I remember he always left work early on Fridays to have enough time to see his mistress. But it's hardly the same – how old is she, eighteen?" he arches an eyebrow mockingly.

"Twenty," Brian answers reluctantly. "The two of them were found in the hotel, but only he died of poison - Miss Walker was killed by cutting her throat open. The murderer made one smooth and sure move, and she bled out quickly. Mr. Blake, on the other hand, got a head injury from a fall - probably when he lost consciousness from the poison. He ended up dying in his sleep, just like the first victim."

"How humane," Matthew says.

Will shakes his head. "It's not humane. The first murder was humane. It's... just a coincidence," he says, and Brown looks at him with interest, as always. Graham sighs. "What happened to Frederick?"

"He was lucky - that cocktail of drugs our killer turned into artfully crafted poison was partly neutralized by those drugs our dear doctor has been prescribing himself on a regular basis for about five years now" Price says with a wry smile.

"By the way, are we still going to ignore how immortal this man is?" Zeller asks. "He literally violates every single law of logic and common sense. How many times has he not died by now?"

"He's a cat," Price says knowingly. "He has nine lives. This one seems to be at least his fourth. When I was a kid, our neighbors had a cat that was missing an ear and half a tail, had a limp, and had a scar on his nose. I think if Chilton had a patronus he'd look exactly like that."

Jack coughs, attracting attention and forcing the men to gather their thoughts. Both immediately nod awkwardly. "Yeah, so. Chilton was found in an alley outside a liquor store. Apparently, he was grabbed as he walked to his car and was injected in the neck with the drug we already familiar with." Zeller pulls photos from the accident scene and from the hospital, taken after the doctors had intervened. "He had The Fool card in his mouth," he says and turns to Price, waiting for his comment.

The man smiles, satisfied to be helpful and also to shine with his fresh knowledge. "It's a mockery. A fool, in this case, seems to mean a stupid man who himself doesn't know what he's doing and is too careless and self-righteous. I'm not an expert, of course, but he's certainly at least heard something about Chilton".

Will recalls their last conversation with Chilton, him warning Frederick to be more careful with Hannibal. Something now tells him that the man didn't listen to him. He looks at Matthew, expectantly colliding glances with him, but saying nothing aloud.

Graham sighs, taking the pictures in his hands and going through them. Jimmy and Brian, realizing from the mood in the room that they had better start keeping quiet while the profiler "does his thing," step back to mind their own business quietly. Jack stays standing out of the way, watching Will and Brown from the sidelines, while he in turn looks somewhat uncertainly at Graham, trying to figure out if he can stay around or if he'd better step back. After all, he's supposed to be his support here. What's the point of a shield if you throw it to the other end of the field when your opponents are running at you with swords?

He stays right where he stands, getting no other command. More like an airbag than a helmet - not protecting all the time, but ready to be there whenever needed.

Graham sighs, closing his eyes.

The pendulum swings. One. Two. Three.

Lara Johnson was the first.

I'm not a client. She doesn't perceive me that way. And I don't perceive myself that way. I'm a friend. I have sympathy for her, and it pains me to see her fading with each passing day, unable to crawl out of the hole she was thrown into years ago. It's not her fault. I don't like to think about it, but I do, I think about it every time I look at the bruises on her body, every time I notice the scars on her wrists. Every time she turns it all into a joke, smiling sweetly at me with a tinge of pain.

She has a scar on her face that is many years old. It's a problem with her job - not everyone likes that kind of thing, so she's more likely to attract perverts and weirdos. And she attracted me. But I don't want to hurt her. I don't like pain; pain is ugly. I want to help her.

I slip sleeping drugs in her tea, and I don't take a step away from her, spending with her the last moments of her life, making her smile with my talk. She falls asleep, and I just stare at her for a while, because it's hard for me to make up my mind. I talk myself into thinking it's necessary.

I take a small first aid kit out of my bag, check my medicine, and refill the syringe. When I inject the poison into Lara's body, she frowns faintly at the pain of it, but her facial features relax again almost immediately.

I stare at her as the life drains out of her. I don't immediately dare touch her chest with my hand to check for a heartbeat.

Why did I decide to give you the card? Will frowns, turning his gaze to the side. There are cards on the table. *I was doing you a card spread to occupy our time with something interesting. I pick up the cards, putting them away in a box, but one falls, catching my attention. I look down and an ominous feeling overwhelms me. I slowly pick the card up off the floor, peering at the image of the Tower.*

This is a disaster. This is an upheaval. This is a change.

My rejection of the past. The old ways are no longer good enough, nor are the old beliefs - time to change my suit and throw my old shell into the trash - it's irreparably damaged, gaping holes in the heart area.

Lara Johnson wasn't the first. I'd killed before her - tried my own medicine, different doses. I couldn't risk giving her something too painful or something in an insufficient dosage. But she was the first one I dignified to be found. Discovered. You may have wanted a different life for yourself, dreamed of a different glory, but that's all I can give you. I'm sorry.

I clear the card and put it in her mouth. This is your disaster, our shared upheaval, and my change. I haven't killed like this before. Now I will.

The chick fledged and flew out of the nest.

The caterpillar, whispered instructions and spells through its chrysalis, became a butterfly.

This is my design.

"How fast does the poison leave the system?" he asks, raising his head.

Jimmy looks at him a little confused. "Um... pretty quickly. After three days, it's almost impossible to detect," he answers.

Will nods, dropping his gaze to the picture. "She's not the first. He's tried the poison on others. Several times. He didn't want her to be hurt, he wanted to make it good," Graham says. "Maybe it was someone whose disappearance wouldn't be noticed, or someone whose death wouldn't be scrutinized much. But not drug addicts - and hardly prostitutes, he felt sympathy for them."

"An empathic psychopath?" Jack asks.

Graham rubs the bridge of his nose. Matthew looks at him intently, hesitantly taking half a step closer to be near him. "Will?" he asks softly.

"It's all right," Will replies, while he himself inadvertently recalls Hannibal's words. You're not alone, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

He squints.

The pendulum swings again. One. Two. Three.

I was already waiting for them in the room, in the dark, when they arrived.

They are drunk and too engrossed in each other to sense my presence nearby. I blend into the shadows easily. I'm used to being invisible, but that's not what I'm here for. I step into the light and act quickly.

The needle ends up in Mr. Blake's neck, and he pulls away from his girlfriend, holding onto the place where the syringe is sticking out, looking back at me in fright. I don't pay any attention to him, because he's already falling to the floor, hitting his head. I don't even look in his direction. I don't take my eyes off Miss Walker, who is mute in fear. She takes one step back, and I follow. She turns around, hoping to run away, but I quickly and deftly shorten the distance between us and slit her throat with the knife - quickly, with perfect pressure. I lay her down in the chair in the corner of the room where I'd been sitting, and comfortingly stroke her hair. She's not sinless, but it's not her fault. I sympathize with her, but I believe she will go to a better place after death than that nasty man's bed.

I took her from the Devil's hands and gave her to the God.

I finally look at Mr. Blake. He's passed out. Shame. I'd like to look into his eyes for a bit longer. To see if he feels any guilt for condemning his girl to such suffering.

I put him on the bed, undressed and then put the Devil card in his mouth. Because the Devil is lust, is an addiction, a man as a slave of his desires. That's why you're here, Mr. Blake. It's nothing personal; I'm just a mediator between the heavens and the earth. I do the will of powers beyond your comprehension, those in front of which you tremble, for you must tremble.

This is my design.

Will opens his eyes, swallowing. His head begins to ache from the tension. He feels Matthew standing beside him, and it has some calming effect. "He knew Blake. Not closely, but enough to have some idea of his way of life. And he feels sorry for the woman. He always feels sorry for women, but that doesn't mean he doesn't kill them. He believes he's doing what's right. He sees it as helping them."

"The world's first psychopath with a normal relationship with his mother?" Price jokes wryly.

"Hobbs loved women too," Brian reminds.

"Ouch," Jimmy notes.

Graham wrinkles his nose, remembering Hobbs and inevitably his daughter. The scene in the kitchen flashes before his eyes, and he must be flinching because Matthew notices his

condition and places a hand gently on his shoulder. "Hey, it's okay," he whispers supportively, and Will meets his gaze. "Do you want to go home?"

Will wants to go home, but he swallows and shakes his head, taking the last stack of pictures. At least the man in them is still alive.

One. Two. Three.

Chilton deserves the fate I have prepared for him. I have seen his ignorance with my own eyes, and I have heard enough about him to be sure of my choice. The Fool card is in my pocket. I'm a little nervous because this is the first time I've had to chase someone outdoors rather than indoors. The danger makes my heart beat a little harder, but I take a deep breath and calmness comes to me. I have a mission. I have to do it. A gift to the Emperor from his Magician.

Chilton walks without looking around, never looking under his feet, and it's even funny. The Fool indeed. I grab him abruptly and drag him to a dark corner of the alley, shoving poison into his neck and shutting his mouth with my palm. He flails his legs in a funny way, panicking and trying to call for help, and I shush him quietly, but he calms down even without that - the drug is starting to take effect. His body weakens, and I let him go, leaving him near the trash cans.

I pull a card from my pocket and put it in the dying man's mouth. You, Frederick, are acting like a fool, and you don't know what you're doing, what bull you're taunting with a red rag. You are so overconfident and careless that it hurts. This is the price you pay for your stupidity and ignorance. I wish I had time to watch life after so many years flow out of you like sand through my fingers.

I hide in the dark and leave, hoping to read the news about it in the paper the next morning.

Hoping that someone else will read about it, too.

This is my design.

Will flinches as he opens his eyes. "The Magician kills a Fool as a gift for the Emperor, but the Fool escapes his fate. The all-powerful Mage faces a mistake for the first time, falls face down in the dirt in front of his authority - one can only wonder what he can do in an attempt to make amends," he says in a quick, nervous tone.

"Emperor? What Emperor?" asks Jack a little incomprehensively.

"Someone he considers strong, respected. It's someone experienced, also a killer. He has authority in his eyes. Someone as dominant as a lion. Someone who has a clear plan. Someone who wants to control everything" he crinkles nervously. A familiar name dances on the tip of his tongue with fiery hooves, and he has to swallow before he accepts the inevitability of what he has to say. "Jack, Hannibal may know who the Magician is."

For a moment, silence hangs in the room.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Zeller exclaims.

"Another former patient he turned into a murderer and saved for better times, like a winter's provisions?" Price asks. "Oh, I told you we should have checked everyone who's ever been treated by him, every last one of them," he remarks.

"This smells like Scott Pilgrim," Brian says. "Kill all my evil exes so you can live happily ever after."

Jack looks at Will, lips pressed together, tense. Graham shakes his head. "I won't talk to him, Jack. It didn't help last time, it won't help this time either. Maybe they don't even know each other - maybe they've never talked to each other, maybe they'll never be. He may well be someone watching from the sidelines, someone who doesn't get too close, just adoring him from afar. You don't have to know the emperor personally to want to kneel before him."

Matthew looks at him thoughtfully, a thought process on his face, reflected in the slight frown and the way he bites his lip a little.

"But he wants to talk to him," Jack says. "We can establish a line of communication between him and Lecter. Since he feels guilty about not succeeding with Chilton, he might want to apologize, in some form. If you're right and this is the first time he's encountered such a mistake, he might be depressed, hysterical - this might be our chance to provoke him."

"No," Brown says suddenly, thereby attracting the slightly confused attention of everyone present. He sighs, feeling even a little awkward. "Well, when you *kill for someone*, you want to show yourself. You try to prove that you're smart, that you're strong, that you're original. To make the person interested. It's basically just a form of courtship," he says, and after catching Will's gaze on him, he awkwardly freezes with his mouth open for a few moments before he hurriedly and somewhat embarrassedly continues, sticking his hands in his pockets. "Anyway, my point is that ruining the first impression like this is a disaster. He's going to want to fix it. He'll try to outdo himself. Give him a line of communication - and try to guess whose head Dr. Lecter will want to see on his plate?" he asks rhetorically. "I won't point my finger at anyone."

The silence is almost awkward. Only Jack looks like a stone wall. "He'll send him to kill Will, like Will once sent you to kill him?"

"Will didn't send me to kill Hannibal Lecter," Matthew answers immediately, not going to retract what he said in court.

Crawford looks at him ironically. Graham clears his throat. "That's... that's not a courtship," he says, gently taking the subject of the conversation aside. "I know one when I see one. He sees Hannibal as his mentor, his teacher. He wants to impress him. But he doesn't want to sit on the throne beside him, he wants to displace him - and become the magician on the throne," he casts a glance at Brown before beginning to avoid looking at anyone again. "It's not love or passion. He's just a student who wants to get a good mark on his exam and end up in a professor's chair in a couple of years."

Crawford nods. "What else can you tell me about him?"

"White, about thirty years old, probably related to medicine, but I wouldn't recommend focusing too much on that. His mother was probably sick with something, and he learned how to give injections on her." Will sighs, trying to push the alien shell away from himself so he doesn't get stuck in it like in a swampy sludge.

"Why does he use tarot?" Jack asks.

"The cards simplify the world," Graham wipes his glasses before putting them on. "He oversimplifies the complexities of human relationships into cards, symbols, labels. He's a missionary, thinks he's purifying the world of those who don't deserve to live in it. Cards help categorize potential victims," he explains and sighs, looking at Matthew. He immediately, understanding his signal, heads ahead of him toward the exit. "I have nothing more to say, Jack, I'm sorry and... good luck."

"Wait, that's it?" asks Crawford, stopping him. "What about whether or not he's going to kill again soon? And who?"

Will sighs almost irritably. "I don't know, Jack. Read the cards - it'll do as much good as my predictions on that matter," he says a little harshly, but then softens up nonetheless. "I'll text you if I figure anything out."

"Oh, come on, do you even get paid for this?" Matthew asks, continuing to hold the door open for him.

Graham doesn't answer, just sighs and walks away. Brian and Jimmy say goodbye to him tentatively, and Brown compensates for his boyfriend's uncommunicative nature by smiling and waving at them before following him out the door.

Meanwhile, in his glassed cell at BSHCI, Hannibal Lecter is drawing on a white sheet of paper with a pencil the outline of Saint Sebastian tied to a tree; arrows stick out of him, as tradition demands, and his face is beatific, his features combined with dark curls that cannot fail to remind of his dear Will. He sighs quietly, feeling an unpleasant heaviness of thoughts around his chest.

He has never been the type to regret any of his actions or decisions; the past is merely the chain of events that led him to the present moment, nothing more. He has no power over the past, he is drowning in the present, he is blinded by the future. The amount of shards at his feet is insane - hundreds of broken cups shattered into thousands of little pieces, so much so that the parquet can't even be seen. It seems that no matter what step he takes now, he inevitably steps on the glass, hurting himself to the point of bleeding. Existing with an endless amount of background pain makes him melancholic.

Perhaps what he did in the kitchen was a mistake. Maybe he should have given Will another chance, shown him Abigail and flown off with him, leaving his whole old life behind. They might not have been happy in the usual sense of the word, but they would have felt good together; their evenings would have been full of conversation and their dinners full of glances and smirks. Will would every day tell him something that would surprise him, and it would fill Lecter's heart with warmth, bringing a perfectly charmed smile to his face.

The corners of his lips quivers tensely and with mild irritation as his subconscious reminds him that, right at this very moment, Graham was surprising someone else. He was talking to someone else, he was looking at someone else, and he was having dinner with someone else.

Hannibal, of course, doesn't doubt at all that Matthew is just a temporary infatuation, Will's way of pissing him off or something. Matthew isn't real. He can never love Graham the way Hannibal loves him. And it's almost insulting that Will lets him touch him where even Lecter has never did. It's like a man choosing wine at an expensive prestige store, and settling on something cheaper than twenty bucks.

He sighs quietly as he puts down his pencil and looks at the spot where the arrow plunges into St. Sebastian's body. He recalls how Will flinched, how he sobbed as the vengeful punitive hand stabbed his body with a knife, how he then clutched at him instead of pushing him away. Hannibal covers his eyes, feeling everything that happened that night with his whole body. He changed Will. Will has changed him. But now there's a new variable in that beautiful equation that spoils Lecter's whole plan, like some annoying fly perched on a petri dish, preventing the right chemical reaction from happening. Once he removes it, he has to start all over again.

He hears the door open and opens his eyes, and a familiar orderly comes into his sight just in time. The tall man is slouching slightly with his head tilted forward, and his long dark hair partially hides his pale, thin face from everyone. His palms are sweaty under his gloves, his breathing is a little more choppy than usual today, and on sniffing, Hannibal can smell cigarettes - the young man must have smoked a few this morning when he read the news.

"Hello, Alex," Lecter says calmly and with a soft smile, and the man rolling the food tray cart toward him freezes for a moment as he raises his gaze to his face. The bright emerald-colored eyes look troubled, wary. A little guilty - of course, he can understand him. After all, he had failed in his task.

Hannibal wasn't angry or upset that Chilton had survived the attack. There was even something amusing about it - it seemed Frederick could get out of any mess, with charming ridiculousness and accompanied by the sound of an accordion. It only makes the idea of killing him with his own hands more tempting, cutting him off, as he had once done with Gideon, one piece at a time, feeding him to himself. Though it's unlikely that Chilton would have had the stomach to do something like that. But who knows what the Fool is capable of, though.

He was just as interested in the Magician, of course. It was a fun experiment - another chrysalis into which he whispered his dark spells, to see what would eventually hatch from the cocoon. Alex Wit was as good as he could be - the perfect option for Hannibal's plan. He'd noticed this boy long ago, when he'd first gotten here; he'd already noticed the crack in him the first time they'd met, those which he'd taken great pleasure in widening to a bottomless chasm over the past couple of months, beginning back on that unfortunate evening when he'd read Freddie Lounds' article about Matthew and Will's affair. Alex walked in just in time with dinner on a tray, and as Lecter glanced at his snow-white coat, an amusing idea struck him. After all, if Will could have his murderous orderly on a leash, why couldn't he?

Of course, it wasn't a perfect picture. Graham didn't have to do anything to get Matthew to kill for him; Hannibal had to use certain techniques to get the young man in the right mood. He was impossibly grateful that Alana, though she was obsessed with keeping the world safe from Lecter's influence by locking him out several doors, still had enough self-respect not to engage in eavesdropping, as Chilton did. Because of this, he was able to exchange a few phrases with Alex every time he came in, each time pressing the right spots, discovering them by looks, by the smell of the unique mixture of drugs on his hands, or by the scent of vulgar women's perfume that was present on him every Saturday. Sometimes the orderly's hands would shake as he put the tray in the food tray, and sometimes he was like a glass of water slowly turning to ice in the freezer.

And there was something magical, almost mesmerizing about his green eyes. For many weeks he could determine his mood and anxiety only by them, since the man never spoke a word to him. Once at dinner, Lecter asked him how his mother had died, and only then, the next night, Alex did spoke to him.

"She couldn't bear the severity of her illness and raised the dose of her medicine to lethal," he told him then in a low, somber voice.

Hannibal looked at him interestedly, seeking his gaze. "Her hands were shaking and she couldn't do it herself, so she asked you to do it?" he asked. The young man froze at first, continuing to stare at the floor, and then nodded, staying where he was, waiting for some words, for something else before he left, sensing that Lecter might have something to tell him, something he needed. "It's a great honor, you should feel flattered. The desire to relieve someone's suffering is the most noble motivation for murder."

Wit didn't flinch at the word "murder," and Hannibal smirked slightly. Interesting. Not a chess game, but a Rubik’s cube - interesting just until you learn how to assemble it.

It gets boring real fast.

But he was the perfect tool. Even despite his failure with Frederick, Lecter sensed the necessary potential in him. The desire to show himself, to demonstrate his strength, his skills to the Emperor, to make him notice him and bestow on him something that none of them could yet put into words or even images - all of this overwhelmed Alex. He may have looked like a walking corpse, but he had energy and enthusiasm, and, most importantly, a belief in what he was doing which made him almost invincible. "Failures make us wiser, Alex," Hannibal says, not looking up from the sheet of paper on which he is drawing a new sketch with quick strokes. "Sometimes we have to make a mistake during a small thing in order to succeed during a big one next time," he says, turning the drawing on his desk to face Wit, and the man, without changing his face, lifts his head slightly, peering into the features. Then he lifts his gaze to Lecter's face and nods without saying a word to him. "It's amazing how much can be accomplished if you choose the right place and time and don't rush too much in the pursuit of two rabbits. What almost worked last time can work out great this time."

Alex listens to him, and then, not reacting in any way, turns around and walks away, having received his professor's assignment for the final exam.

Looking after him, Hannibal sighs, then lowers his gaze to the drawing on his desk. The picture of the Hermit card, with his dark curls and a young face with slight stubble, is erased after a few moments, leaving behind only small crumbs, which he carelessly brushes off the table. The same fate awaits the Hanged Man card just a few seconds later.

Chapter 18

Matthew's passion for violence, of course, did not just magically disappear merely because of his love for Will. But the man was willing to compromise for his sake, so Brown found an almost legal and relatively safe way to release his destructive energy: fight clubs. He'd go every couple of weeks and come back with a few bruises, but at least he didn't injure himself or his opponents too much, and they couldn't put him in jail for anything, so Graham was pretty okay with it, though he wasn't entirely happy, of course. He knew Matthew would drop this hobby immediately if he told him to do so, but it was also quite clear to him that it would be a little unfair on his part; as much as Brown exalted him to the rank of gods, he still didn't want to be as selfish as they might be. He wanted normality, a normal relationship, and those required some concessions and respect for each other's interests. So Will simply made Matthew promise to always remember that he was expected home safe, unharmed, and without a ticket back to prison. Matthew happily kept that promise.

He still didn't like being away from Graham for long periods of time anyway, so he never spent much time at the fights - he fought a couple of times until the first blood was drawn, and then packed up and left, satisfied and full. Tonight he wasn't going to linger either, so after getting a couple of bruises and breaking his opponent's nose, he changed in the empty locker room while the others continued to watch the rest of the fights.

The first thing he did once he was alone was pull a bottle of water and his phone out of his bag. Taking sip after sip, he checks his messages, and smiles when he sees several notifications from Will.

my heartbeat, [17:55]

Did you take my T-shirt again?

my heartbeat, [17:58]

Okay, for the next couple of months I'll keep finding this romantic.

my heartbeat, [17:59]

But then it's going to become annoying, be sure of that.

my heartbeat, [18:25]

I'm starting to make dinner, so you better rush home.

my heartbeat, [18:26]

In my T-shirt.

Matthew smiles, glowing with love and happiness. After thinking about it, he opens his camera and takes a few selfies. He ends up sending Will the best one, in which he smirks and

winks, deliberately showing off his abs and slightly ragged post-fight appearance. No matter how Graham felt about him and the violence, Brown knew a little blood turned him on.

Matthew, [18:30]

sitting here, alone, unkissed. when will it end?

Brown sees that Will reads the message, and can't help but smile when he starts typing a response not right away.

my heartbeat, [18:32]

Did you take my T-shirt to not wear it?

Matthew, [18:33]

don't worry, I'll put it on so you'll have something to take off me when I get home ;)

my heartbeat, [18:34]

I'll take it off you and put it on myself.

Matthew, [18:34]

wow, sexy!

my heartbeat, [18:35]

No, it's not.

Matthew, [18:35]

yes, it is ;))))

The message is marked as read, but no reply comes, and Brown chuckles merrily, vividly imagining Will blushing, and sighs at the thought of it. It's so pleasant to imagine that he even allows himself to cover his eyes for a few moments and immerse himself in that cute picture before him. Then he returns to reality with the same smile.

Matthew, [18:37]

I'll try to be there for dinner as soon as possible, my love ;)

my heartbeat, [18:38]

Drive safe.

Brown smiles warmly at this message and then hurriedly pulls Will's T-shirt and his pants out of the bag, getting dressed in a hurry and getting into the car in just a couple of minutes. He really tries to drive carefully, only softly singing along to the songs playing from his playlist to make the journey feel a little shorter. Once parked outside the house, he almost jumps out

of the car, quickly heading for the door; Mulberry immediately meets him in the living room, starting to happily circle around his beloved owner's feet, and he squats down to scratch her belly. The man laughs as he looks around with a smile at the dogs tired after their walk, and then goes into the kitchen, where the pleasant aroma of supper is wafting up to him and Will stands by the sink, washing apples and putting them in a fruit vase. Brown, smiling, quickly shortens the distance between them, quiet as a panther, and hugs Graham from behind. He doesn't even flinch, though; it was hard not to hear him coming, considering how happily Mulberry was barking just a minute ago. So Will only snorts as Matthew tickles his neck. "Hello, Mr. Graham... what are you going to indulge me in for dinner tonight?" Brown almost purrs in his ear, sliding his palms across his body over his white T-shirt - his white T-shirt. Of course this is his. Adorable.

"Everything's already on the table," Will remarks calmly, though he's tempted to smile. "Fish and baked potatoes."

"I love it when we eat what you catch," Matthew smiles contentedly and kisses him again, then steals the washed apple right out of his hands and goes to the table, feeling hungry like a wolf, not knowing where to start, so he bites into the apple and in the next moment takes his fork and starts eating his portion. Will only shakes his head with a smile as he pours their tea and sits quietly across from him. There is only sincerity and nothing wrong with Matthew's phrase, but it leaves a strange aftertaste on his tongue, and Graham tries to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

"How was today?" he asks, though he usually doesn't; Brown, of course, notices it right away, glancing at him, frozen and squinting slightly for a few moments.

He immediately proceeds to eat the potatoes, though. "Didn't break anything, beat them all. There's a couple of bruises, sure, but I look even sexier this way," he winks at him. "Will you check it out later? Shall we play doctor and patient? I can lend you my white coat, I still have it."

Graham snorts with a chuckle. "I'd be an awfully grumpy nurse, there'd be nothing sexy about it."

"You underestimate yourself," Matthew points his fork expertly at him before sending the slice of potato into his mouth.

"You overestimate me, Matthew," Will notes with a soft smile.

"Well, as long as it works, I don't see anything wrong with it," he just shrugs, continuing to eat his dinner with enthusiasm while Graham watches him with a warm, thoughtful gaze. He is distracted only when their eyes collide and he drops his gaze a little shyly, shifting his attention to his portion.

After dinner, Matthew does the dishes while Graham watches him from the sidelines, and Brown can't help but feel that look on himself. He loves this attention, so he can't stop smiling even while doing such a boring chore. But, sadly, it ends quickly, because Will goes off to shower, leaving him alone. Brown sighs as he wipes his hands with a towel and sits down on the couch, a little tired. He boredly picks up the book he left on the table the day

before, opening it on the bookmark, and pops a strawberry-flavored gum in his mouth, immersing himself in reading.

"You're still in my T-shirt," Will says, and Matthew, who hadn't even noticed that he'd already returned from the shower, turns around slightly bewildered to look at him and smile.

"Well, I thought you promised to get it off me yourself," he remarks innocently, not taking his eyes off Graham, folding the edge of the book page and closing it, losing all interest in the plot. Will is wearing too many clothes after his shower, Matthew can't help but notice. Nevertheless, he is quite confident in his ability to seduce Graham, and so he smirks and leans back deliberately way too relaxed on the couch, spreading his arms slightly, throwing one over the armrest. "I'm all yours, Mr. Graham."

Will stares at him motionless for a few agonizingly long seconds, but Matthew doesn't give up, continuing to offer himself with his whole appearance and gaze. Finally Graham comes closer and, without saying anything, sits down on the edge of the couch, stretching his hands to the bottom edge of his T-shirt. He begins to pull it up, and Brown smirks contentedly, raising his hands to let him take it off. As soon as the fabric reaches the level of his wrists, Matthew abruptly throws it off to the side and intercepts Will's hands, flopping him onto the couch with his back and hovering over him, tucking Graham under him like a cat does with a mouse. A victorious smile sparkles on Brown's face as he looks into the man's slightly bewildered face, clutching his wrists, feeling his heartbeat quicken. "My little birdie," he smirks, before a second later he covers his ajar lips with a passionate kiss.

He feels Graham eagerly respond to this eager kiss as their tongues collide, and his arousal grows with each passing moment. His body temperature seems to rise, his groin feels heavy, and he runs through dozens of scenarios in his head of what he wants to do next - suck Will's dick while kneeling in front of him? Take him into the bedroom and press his back against the door, fuck him quickly and with animal passion? Put him in their bed and love him so tenderly that he cries out in impatience and desire for more? Or maybe just slip a hand under his pajama pants and do it all right here, without being distracted from exploring his attractive, hot mouth?

The decision, of course, is left to Graham himself, and Matthew is just waiting for him to give him a hint of what he wants to do tonight. Suddenly, just as they stop their kiss and Will licks his reddened lips, the man grins. "What a strong boy," he utters, and Brown breaks into a smug smile. "But I want some whiskey first. You can just finish the chapter in the meantime," he remarks, and, feeling the slightly confused young man loosen his grip on his arms, gently pushes him away, getting up from the couch and heading for the kitchen. Matthew looks after him bewildered, not quite sure how he's supposed to read about the author's subtle spiritual suffering with a boner. Nevertheless, he is a very obedient boy, so he leans back on the back of the couch and picks up the book he has set aside, opening it and trying in vain to concentrate on the lines. Will has clearly decided to test his patience. Well. That's usually worth it.

Graham returns a few minutes later with a glass in his hands. Matthew immediately looks up at him, trying to figure out if it's time or not yet, but seeing Will take a small sip of whiskey and set the glass down on the small table, then placing his freed hand on his lover's knee,

immediately tosses the book aside uninterested, keeping his eyes on him, and is already about to pounce, when suddenly he realizes what he sees. Graham, clutching his knee, drops to the floor in front of him, right between his slightly spread legs. "*What*- what are you doing?" Matthew asks excitedly.

"Getting down on my knees in front of you, what else does it look like?" Will asks, sliding his gaze to his groin and tilting his head slightly sideways. Brown's breath catches. "Help me get them off," he says, taking hold of the edge of Matthew's sweatpants.

"Are you going to-"

"Yes."

"Oh my God."

Graham laughs softly, still tugging at the edge of his pants a couple more times so that Brown will come to his senses and let him get rid of that piece of clothing.

Matthew looks as excited as if he's going to die. Will watches with pleasure as such a simple action of his drives the man crazy, and then lowers his gaze again to the level of his groin, seeing a fully hard cock. This doesn't surprise him. He licks his lips, thinking whether or not to say it out loud, and eventually decides to do it. "I've never done this before, so… despite the way you usually do it, don't have high expectations."

"Oh my God," Matthew exhales excitedly like he's praying, raising his gaze disbelievingly to the ceiling, thinking he might cum just from just the mere realization of this situation.

Will takes this as a sufficient answer and, swallowing, tries not to be nervous, putting all thoughts aside; he moves closer and carefully takes the head in his mouth, circling it with his tongue. Brown swears under his breath and clutches the armrest of the couch, and when the man moves a little further, reaching the middle, not even starting to really suck it yet, just trying the feel of it on his tongue, a whimpering moan escapes Matthew's lips, and he squirms, feeling his heart and breathing go wildly out of rhythm. Graham looks up at him, eager to greedily absorb his every reaction not only audibly but visually as well, but all he sees is a beautiful body with a couple of new bruises and his head tilted back. Will pulls away slightly. "Look at me," he says confidently, and Brown obeys in the same instant, and when their gazes collide, Graham feels absolutely no desire to look away, letting in someone else's tumultuous feelings and emotions that border on maddening insanity. Without breaking eye contact, he gulps his dick down to half at once again, beginning to move unhurriedly.

"Oh my God-" he can see Matthew trying not to look away. There is so much in his green eyes: desire, passion, fear, faith bordering on sectarian enthusiasm, adoration, love, and something hard to put into words; it is something intangible, something that can drive anyone crazy if left unsupervised. He pulls his free hand to his mouth in the old habit to muffle his moans, but Will squeezes his fingers harder on his knees, and Brown's hand freezes over his mouth, covering it but not muffling anything.

And there are many sounds. Matthew moans as if he's not getting a blowjob from an unskilled man who's never held another man's dick in his mouth before, but as if he's getting

the best sex of his life. He doesn't dare put his hand down and bury it in Will's curls, as if he's afraid the illusion will collapse and the oasis will dissolve before his eyes. Graham pulls away for a few moments to catch his breath, and a thin thread of saliva runs from the cock to his lips, an image that pushes him so close to the edge that it's a miracle he can keep his balance and not fall over right away. Will slowly inhales quietly a few times, looking at his dick, and then takes it in his mouth again and - *"Oh my god"* - begins to move faster, a little awkwardly, trying to repeat what Brown has always done to him, but feeling that he needs much more practice to reach him in this skillful mastery.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, *Will-"* he moans, losing the ability not only to formulate thoughts, but even to utter fragments of it, so much so that he even forgets to warn the man that he is very close, and ends up cumming with a subtle moan, right into Graham's mouth.

Will, not expecting it and not having a chance to adapt to it at once, swallows just a few, pulling away, and the white droplets get on his face and neck, staining his shirt slightly and dripping under it onto his collarbones. Matthew is experiencing a new wave of pleasure from just the mere sight of it, and it feels devastating, like his soul was taken out of him for a few moments and then abruptly brought back in. He finds nothing to say for the first time in his life, and continues to just breathe heavily, looking at Will until he rises from the floor, saddling him, and points a finger at his lips, which still have whitish droplets on them. Matthew, though still somewhat unconscious by this point, pushes himself forward and follows the unspoken order, feeling himself on Graham's tongue, quietly moaning into his mouth.

His arms finally find their place, embracing Will as they continue kissing. The blissful emptiness in Brown's head is replaced by a new wave of admiration, and he has the urge to give Graham all he can, knowing that any effort he makes will never have the same effect on a man as the scene that just occurred has on him.

As soon as their lips part, he looks at Will with painfully intense adoration and devotion. "I would literally do anything for you," this truth flies from his lips as he finds nothing else to say, though he realizes it was all obvious before.

Will smiles softly at him, placing his hand on his cheek, gently caressing him. "It works both ways," he admits, and Matthew blinks a little bewildered, not knowing what to reply to that, too startled, like being shot by an arrow straight through his heart. He decides to answer him with a kiss, a deep, enthusiastic, passionate one, stroking his back with his palms, and then standing abruptly with him, cutting off the kiss, only to grab his hand and lead him confidently into the bedroom, to throw him on the bed there and explore every inch of his body with his tongue, to leave hundreds of kisses, love bites, hickeys, inflaming the man and inflaming himself again, like a half-burned match to which the spark of fire has been brought again, and now it intends to burn to the end.

Around one a.m. they lie in each other's arms, tired after having sex and taking a shower together, listening to each other's heartbeats. The silence is soothing, and they both soon fall asleep.

Will stands in the darkness, seemingly empty, until he turns around and notices Matthew standing nearby in a beam of bright white light. The sight of him alone calms Graham's

uneasiness, and he smiles a little, beginning to move toward him like a moth to a lamp, as suddenly he hears a strange clunking sound and flinches, stopping on reflex, seeing something horrific: Matthew's body is pierced by an arrow. Will recoils and begins to walk faster toward him, but the closer he gets, the more arrows hit his body, until Brown finally gives up from the pain, losing his balance and falling straight into his arms. His eyes are full of fear and yet care, and he tries to lift his hand, trembling from the wound in his shoulder, and touch him. Will stares at this, unable to do anything, shockingly helpless, as if tied at the hands or feet. Suddenly Brown lunges at him with his last strength, pushing Graham under him like a cat does with a mouse, and Will is at first confused as five new arrows pierce Matthew's body, striking exactly where Graham himself had been just moments before.

The man's body gradually weakens, and Will sees the light in his eyes fade, consumed by the surrounding darkness move through the arrows inside his dead body. He falls, pressing the man down with his weight, and Graham feels as if he is suffocating, and tears flow from the corners of his eyes in hot streaks, leaving deadly burns behind. A hysterical shiver overtakes his whole body, panic grips his consciousness, and he wakes up.

He opens his eyes abruptly and sits up on the bed, waking Brown, who is lying next to him peacefully. He blinks sleepily, trying to understand what happened, and then hastily pulls his arms toward him, gently smoothing him down like a frightened cat. "Hey, it's okay, it was just a dream. We're home, it's okay," he tells him in a husky voice, moving closer to hug him, to reassure him as he usually did, but Will suddenly jerks reflexively, getting out of bed.

Matthew looks at him confusedly, waking up completely. Graham swallows, looking at him like he's a hallucination, still unable to calm down. He shakes a little, and for a moment he thinks he hears the sound of a bowstring being drawn; it makes him grab his head with one hand. This alarms Brown even more, and he cautiously follows him out of bed. "Hey, baby, it's okay, it's just a dream, just a dream. You have a very vivid imagination, it happens. You need to ground yourself, okay? Listen to my voice, just listen to me," he asks softly, taking his hands gently and trying to catch his gaze. It turns out to be harder than usual, as if Will can't focus, and the words about Paris dying from a poisoned arrow run through his head in Hannibal's voice. "Baby, I'm here, you're here, and the dogs are downstairs. Do you want to come with me to see the dogs? Or get some fresh air? I can pour you a whiskey, anything," he tries to speak no louder than a whisper, softly but convincingly, firmly. "Will, please," he asks, hugging his face gently with his palms, finally getting a focused look from the man and smiling at him supportively. "There you go. Well done. Everything's fine. You can tell me what you dreamed, if you think it will help you. Or you can not tell me if you don't want to," he suggests. "What do you want? Lie back down?" he asks and Will nods faintly a few times and Matthew nods too. "All right, my love," he gently pulls him back onto the bed, covering him gently with a blanket and hugging him, tightly enough to help him feel like he's really there right now.

Will is silent for so long that Brown decides that he has decided not to tell him about his dream after all, but after a while the silence of the house is broken again by his quiet, husky voice. "You were pierced by arrows. Like Paris. Like a Wound Man."

Matthew sighs softly, and then kisses his shoulder, picking up the right words, realizing that there are none. "We're all his wounded people, in a way," he finally says. "You, me. Jack, Dr.

Bloom..."

Graham nods slowly, biting his lip. "And Margot," something makes him say.

"Hmm?" Brown tentatively encourages him to talk, figuring that the man probably needs to speak out about something he's never mentioned before.

Will swallows, closing his eyes. "Sure, someone could say her brother hurt her with the hands of those... doctors... but that wouldn't be the whole truth. It was his work. He whispered something in Mason's ear, and he came for her - and Hannibal couldn't help knowing that this will happen. It was all calculated," he says, and Matthew tries to make sense of his words, feeling that he's missing something essential. He decides to just keep listening, not asking questions, not interrupting him. "She was pregnant."

Matthew blinks, feeling a chill all over his body, replaced by a germ of anger, which he stifles, knowing that now is not the time to avenge Will's misfortunes, he just needs to help him, to listen, to calm him down, to support him. "It was yours," he says empathetically.

He could easily imagine Graham as a father, and he wasn't even touched by jealousy at the thought; Will would probably be happy. Matthew would have been happy to see him happy.

"It was painful. I saw the potential for parenthood and spiritual connection in Abigail - he took her from me. Twice. I only managed to realize... no more than the idea of a child - and he did it again. Everything I become attached to has been destroyed by him because he doesn't want to leave me any choice, wants me to... surrender to him. To accept our connection and become just like him, just like he's always seen me. For me to give up hope that I can live without him. And he will do anything to destroy you."

Brown is silent for a while, and they just stare at each other in varying degrees of anxiety. "Maybe I can get Alan to kill him," Matthew sighs after all, nuzzling his nose into his neck. "Really, Will. It sounds like a curse from a fairy tale. And all who touch him die in terrible agony, for Rumpelstiltskin or the Evil Queen has bewitched him, for let no man have you..." he grins wryly and sighs again.

"In Hannibal's case, it's more like something from Bluebeard," Graham says, looking into the void before frowning slightly. "When I... didn't run off with him, he took Dr. Du Maurier and ran off with her. And somehow she stayed alive and unharmed after all, as if she had some kind of protection on," he chuckles lightly without fun.

"She even seems to be giving lectures about her... experience living with a monster. In Baltimore," Matthew recalls an article by Lounds that he read about a week ago. Will is pensively silent, and Brown peers curiously into his face, tilting his head a little sideways. "Hey. What's on your mind, Mr. Graham?" he asks with a soft smirk, as if trying to distract and relax Graham a little with his tone and look.

"It would be nice to have the same protection as she has," Will replies uncertainly, frowning slightly, and then focuses his gaze on Brown. "How would you react if I decided to talk to her?" he asks.

Matthew smiles softly, reaching out and stroking his stubbly cheek. "I'm flattered that you're wondering how I'd react," he remarks, lowering his gaze to his lips, then shrugging. "It's not like I've ever talked to her, we've never met. I have no idea what she's like, if she can be trusted or if she's dangerous. So I don't know how to feel about it," he looks him in the eye again. "But if you believe that talking to her might be good for you, I'm all for it. And if you also stop having nightmares afterwards, I'll be the happiest guy on the planet," he smiles, tucking his curl behind the man's ear, and he smiles a little tiredly in response. "You want me to go with you?"

Graham purses his lips, looking away. He thinks about it for a few seconds before shaking his head. "You haven't met each other. Let it stay that way."

"Sounds like you don't think she's safe."

"A person so closely tied to Hannibal just can't be safe," Will remarks, and then, meeting Brown's gaze, chuckles slightly. "Yeah, that applies to me as well," he lies back again and looks up at the ceiling.

"Well, I'm not an innocent saint either, you know," Matthew snorts, lying down more comfortably so that he can look at Will.

"Well, you're the only one in this house who hasn't eaten human meat," Graham remarks.

"Well I wouldn't be so sure. The meatballs in my orphanage tasted pretty suspicious," Brown jokes, and Will chuckles. "Yeah. Very funny. You know what my middle school teacher's name was?"

"Surprise me."

"Mr. Jonathan Hurder."

"No!" Will laughs, tilting his head back and gently nudging him in the shoulder. Matthew smiles broadly, watching with delight at his partner's cheered up thanks to him. "God, tell me you're lying."

"Unfortunately, I'm not. I was the first one to notice that it rhymed with murder, because I made up terrible offensive poems about all the teachers I didn't like. And then I spread a creepy made-up story about this teacher and scared a bunch of twelve-year-olds," he smirks proudly. "Then I decided to make it even more fun and sneaked into the classroom right before our lesson in the morning, doused myself with red paint and laid on the floor. I also dug up the wound from the fight and wrote "urder" on the floor, and smeared one letter before that. Funniest day of my life".

"That's why kids need to receive enough attention," Will remarks with a cheerful smile, stopping to laugh. "Please tell me no one died of a heart attack."

"No, but one impressionable boy fainted - he was afraid of the sight of blood," he shrugs. "I never killed anyone at all, not even accidentally, before I fell in love with you."

"I guess that says a lot of awful things about me."

"No, it's just that I was confused and thought you were a murderer," Matthew snorts. "That's just another thing Hannibal is guilty of. Though, thinking about it now, if it hadn't been for him, we might never have met, you know. It's hard for me to imagine where and who I'd be now. What do you think?"

"About where you'd be without me?" Will asks, and Brown nods, looking at him curiously. Graham sighs, looking up at the ceiling and shrugging. "Well, you're prone to addiction and violence, curious, erudite, painfully lonely. I think you'd be either an alcoholic or a serial killer. More likely the second, because you're mindful of your health, if it's not about junk food."

"Then we could still meet if you started investigating my case," the man smirks, lying on his back next to him and looking dreamily at the ceiling. "How do you think I'd be killing?"

Will ponders this, simultaneously carefully listening to his own feelings about it. Usually the process was the other way around: he would first get a murder, look at the way it had been committed, study the details, and use them to come up with the identity of the murderer. Now he had to come up with a profile first, and only afterwards see a pretty picture.

He closes his eyes, imagining Matthew from another reality, Matthew who has not met him and has not fallen in love, fixating on his image as on a personal totem. "You're capable of cruelty, but you don't enjoy the process of bringing suffering to someone, unless it's something very personal," he says, and *"as it was with Hannibal"* remains unspoken. "You grew up in a religious environment as a child, and no matter how you feel about it now, it has left a mark on your worldview. You look for idols. But you're too picky to imitate anyone. You want attention and you don't want to be lonely. Given that you worked as an orderly in a hospital for mentally ill criminals, perhaps you'd be looking for someone among them... and there is a desire to look better. Yes," he sighs, finally finding what he needs. "Correcting other people's mistakes. Imitation. Play. A new criminal comes in - you study his methods, his behavior, copy his demeanor, like trying on someone else's suit - it doesn't fit you at all, but it's fine for one walk at night. You kill the way this man killed, and you enjoy the fact that no one can catch you like the police did catch them. And that's something new all the time. The police would come into the hospital to talk to the originals, and you'd walk them to the talk room, jingling your keys, twisting them on your finger."

Matthew feels his breath catching. He stares in admiration at Will's profile, at his fluttering lashes the moment before he opens his eyes. Brown's heart pounding in his chest like a madman's one. "How would you catch me?" he asks quietly, almost in a whisper.

"All your murders scream: see me, me, me. There would have been some detail by which I could understand something about you specifically, beneath the many layers of imitation - you wouldn't have held back, you would have left something..." he smiles awkwardly. "You'd probably still be obsessed with me. Because of the Freddie Lounds' articles."

Brown smiles. "Maybe. I'd start leaving gifts for you to see me and my admiration. Letters written in my ragged handwriting."

"That's how I'd find you."

"And would have told the FBI?" he asks curiously.

Will is silent for several long moments before answering. "Yes," he says. "I would have come to arrest you. You wouldn't blame me."

"Of course not."

"You'd try to make it so I wouldn't leave you for good," Will says. "We could have been pen pals, but it's unlikely you'd ever get out of jail."

"I could have escaped."

"No," Graham replies. "That would have meant we couldn't communicate anymore. You wouldn't want to risk that."

They are silent for a while.

"I'd come to you for case counseling."

"Well now you're just being immensely flattering to me!" Matthew snorts with a smile, poking him in the shoulder.

"Sometimes it can be helpful. If there's one good thing Hannibal taught me, it's that a really smart killer can help look at a problem from a different angle and nudge the thought process in the right direction," he grins nervously before turning his head and looking at Brown with a faint smile.

Matthew's not sure whether he should feel flattered by the words about the clever killer, or alarmed by one more mention of Lecter.

"I'm glad you're not killing anyone, Matthew. Let's keep it as our little fantasy, okay?"

Matthew nods with a smile. "Just an exercise for your awesome mind," he confirms, and Will smiles weakly. "You know, my heart melts every time you show me how well you understand me. It's like you're hugging every cell of my body at once."

"Sounds warm and tight," Will remarks.

"Well, I like it when it's warm and tight," he smirks, moving closer to kiss the man, who blushes at his words, and laughs against his cheek. "Oh yes, I'm terrible, I know. But at least I'm not lying," he remarks with a cheerful smile, still lying next to Will, nipping at his ear and hugging his body.

"I know," Graham exhales, then smiles a little. His heart calms in his chest and the man relaxes, feeling himself gradually slipping back into sleep. "I know."

He doesn't have any dreams this time.

Chapter 19

Graham leaves early in the morning, and Matthew stays home alone, starting to do some chores: walking the dogs, exercising, trying to cook something for dinner. The first half of the day passes peacefully in solitude, and he texts Will only twice (once dropping a picture of Mulberry, and the second of himself while jogging; the sun shines brightly in his face, as in the middle of a hot summer, and he smiles; his hair curls a little and sticks to his forehead; Graham reads this and replies briefly, must still be sitting at a Bedelia's lecture to catch her up after to have a private chat). Things go well until, returning from a run, he decides to go and check the fresh mail, suddenly encountering a sense of déjà vu that sends a chill running down his spine.

The letter from Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane hardly weighs anything, yet, holding it in his hands, Matthew feels as if he is holding a monument made of marble. His gaze is fixed on the "for whom" box. His own name seems completely alien, strange there; it's as out of place as a tank stuck in the gates of a circus. If "Will Graham" had been written in elegant handwriting, it would have made more sense, would be more familiar; seeing such an envelope, Matthew would have gone outside and burned it without hesitation and only with mild irritation, watching the flames fly upward over the pathetic attempt of the past to ruin his and Will's reverently constructed present. He felt he should do the same with this letter, but something stopped him; like some premonition, an intuition. There is something wrong. He thinks: what if it's about the investigation? Even if it is, though, it's probably a taunt or a challenge or a threat or something; Matthew has heard enough about Lecter and seen enough of him to know that he would find it fun to throw a gauntlet in his face and challenge him to a duel, thinking he's a better match for Will. Like it's a goddamn contest. As if it's not Will's pure choice, but something that can and should be manipulated to his own pathetic advantage.

He tears the envelope on the side irritably and pulls out the letter, feeling a wave of self-confidence come over him and give him strength. He unfolds the double folded paper, and with an unreadable expression on his face begins to run his eyes over the lines.

Mr. Brown,

Have you ever wondered, looking at someone, why they cling so hard to a love that isn't really worth it? Do you believe your love is genuinely priceless, worth Will clinging to it like a fallen man clinging to a precipice, knowing that sooner or later he will fall off and find himself at the very bottom?

Indeed, how mysterious is the human mind and the feelings it is capable of under certain circumstances.

Alana seems to sincerely believe that your intentions for Will are perfectly pure. In her case, though, it's not faith, but cold calculation. Will, on the other hand, does choose to believe you - like one believes to a righteous sinner. I couldn't help noticing that you made him soft. Very reckless of you. Not cultivating this natural cruelty in him is like taking away brushes and

paints from an artist. He looks at the canvas and doesn't know what to do with them. After a while he may even lose his skill - which would be very unfortunate if he suddenly had to compete with another artist in his craft, don't you think?

The doomsday clock shifts every time mankind makes another reckless mistake, causing a butterfly effect of devastating consequences for the entire world. You are the minor character in Mr. Graham's story, desperately trying to influence the narrative and make that clock go backwards. You don't have that power, Matthew. Sooner or later there will come a moment when Will will have to return to his place in this tale and walk the path that leads to its finale. You are the secondary quest on which he has lingered for far too long. But I ought to remind you: the longer this goes on, the more it hurts to lose everything.

The night we met you told me about the expression "kick the bucket", remember? Of course you do. You could kick that bucket right now yourself and it would all be over. Quicker than bleeding out.

You might want to talk to me soon - if things turn out the way I think they will, and I usually turn out to be right about these matters. Well, I'll be waiting for you. I'm sure it will be quite a fascinating conversation - I'm very curious to see you with my own eyes, and not through Will's rosy veil.

Yours,

Dr. Lecter

P.S. I sincerely ask you not to waste your time worrying and doubting when the hour of judgment comes. Time is always a luxury, and in these cases especially. Think about Will. It shouldn't be difficult for you.

Matthew frowns as he looks at the last lines, then looks up and stares intensely to the side. The sound of the ticking clock reaches him as if through the walls. Anxiety creeps through the words he has read from his head down his throat and settles in his solar plexus, and he finds it quite a bit harder to breathe. He freezes for a few moments, and then, still clutching the letter to the crease in his fist, he rushes to his phone to hastily find Will's contact on it and call him - just to make sure he's okay, just to reassure himself.

The beeps sound almost deafening - like droplets dripping on the concrete floor of the dungeon. The first one. The second. Third...

Graham listens to Bedelia Du Maurier's lecture, looking at her as if he alone in the entire room understands some terribly ironic joke. He feels an unbearable feeling toward this woman, something between wanting to mock her words and spitting on her grave.

She noticed him when he just walked in - but stopped only for a moment, not too surprised; it was as if she knew that sooner or later she would see him again, but she didn't expect it to happen today. Just a moment later, she continued delivering her speech just as calmly and with the same semi-strained (a proper one given the context) appearance. Swallowed by the

beast. Oh, Bedelia, you haven't been swallowed yet - more like just nibbled, licked. No matter how clever you are, you can't imagine what it's like to be swallowed whole by this satanic creature. You have no idea.

When the lecture ends and everyone leaves, Will stays. It's as if Du Maurier isn't paying attention to him, which seems amusing - as if she hoped he might leave in silence, having satisfied his curiosity. But no, of course she couldn't even try to hope for that; she's too smart for this kind of thought. Which means she's just playing her therapist role - silent, waiting for the patient to talk, exposing himself piece by piece just for her attentive cold gaze.

He adjusts his glasses, feeling nervous, twitchy, on edge, and shoves his hands in his pockets as he begins to approach the woman. "Poor Dr. Du Maurier. Swallowed whole, suffering in Hannibal Lecter's created hell," he spits these words in her face with irritation.

"Hello, Will," she says quietly, smiling politely at him, finally raising her gaze.

"He didn't swallow you, Bedelia, you have no idea how much it actually hurts," he stops a few steps away from her, still tense, even more so than before he started talking.

"Do you feel swallowed?" she continues to smile with the edge of her lips, elegantly, like a rich widow at a ball when she is asked to dance for the seventh time in one evening.

"I was swallowed, but I was too alien to his inner system, so he had to throw me up on the floor of his pompous kitchen," he wrinkles, taking off his glasses, tucking them into his jacket pocket; he feels no need for them now, there is no point in shielding himself from Bedelia, she does not let him into her realm, gives him nothing to empathize with, nothing to mirror. A marble statue, a mask instead of a face. "I'm still trying to pick myself up in pieces after that."

"As far as I know, you've found yourself an assistant for this," she remarks, clearly curious about this aspect of his life; Bedelia would never have thought his choice of man could surprise her. She was betting on a quite unremarkable woman as his new date, some sort of complete opposite of Hannibal in everything from gender to her favorite beverage. But Graham, for reasons not entirely clear to her, chose a man, a murderer, addicted to him to the point of sickness. This seemed to her to be some kind of strange sublimation, but she could not be sure regarding this thought. It made her think that she understood Lecter's obsession in some way: Will really was someone capable of surprising even the most sophisticated of minds.

Will shows no outward reaction to her remark. "I look at you and I see just an astonishing confidence in tomorrow for one from our stratum. It's as if you think he hasn't influenced you for a long time - you've become so bold that you've started lecturing about him, telling speeches full of lies bordering on insanity. You don't think he can get to you anymore, even mentally, do you? He no longer scares you, not existentially. How did you manage to get out from under his influence?"

"I'm afraid he was never as interested in me as he is interested in you," she hums faintly with a smooth smile. "He's obsessed with you. You tend to do that to men, it seems. Perhaps it's your eyes. Or it's your tolerance for the most brutal forms of violence."

"You don't know anything about me," Will notes rudely. "You've been looking at me through his eyes all this time. Charming Will Graham, who would become much more charming if he were broken and put through a meat grinder. Hannibal sees what he wants to see in me."

"Your new one is certainly not like that at all," Bedelia remarks with a touch of irony.

"At least what he sees doesn't give me panic attacks or develop my encephalitis," Will replies caustically. "He makes me a better person."

Du Maurier shakes her head with the same all-knowing smirk, and then tilts her head slightly sideways. "You've swapped the devil for a fragile fallen angel with burnt wings, who has lost God and reinvented him in you. Fragile things are very easy to break if one really wants to, Will. And I honestly can't think of anyone Hannibal would want to break more than your Romeo."

"He's not that fragile. You don't know him."

"Some people love makes powerful. Others it makes fragile. If what I've heard about him is to be believed, your boy combines both of those aspects."

"Heard from who?" Will asks. The woman silently chuckles faintly. "Oh, he writes you letters, doesn't he? Gossiping? Complaining about me?" Graham quips wryly.

"I daresay you wouldn't have come here if you didn't think your puppy is fragile enough," Bedelia observes as if she's poking him with a needle. She averts her gaze calmly. "This Tarologist seems to be the new card on the table. Hannibal Lecter has agency in the world now."

"What do you know about this?" Graham asks earnestly.

She looks at him with a thoughtful smile, silent for a while, as if contemplating exactly what she should say for the best possible benefit. "I don't *know* anything, he didn't tell me about it in his letters," says Dr. Du Maurier. "But you and I understand him well enough to realize his train of thought, to guess what might have gone through his mind, don't we?" she smiles and sighs. "There are many things Hannibal likes in this world. Wine, good food, cooking, art, books, you" she chuckles weakly, averting her gaze, taking her briefcase from the table, "metaphors, references, the irony of life and death. Try to think of the most beautiful and devilishly funny move, and you can be sure that's exactly what Hannibal is trying to accomplish."

"Elegance is more important than suffering," he remembers and frowns slightly. The woman looks at him expectantly, counting the seconds before a single obvious idea pops into his head, instantly lighting up his face with grim realization. Will looks like a puppy kicked in the stomach. His lips part slightly, his gaze runs, he takes a breath, and then, without saying anything, he rushes swiftly away from the lecture hall, pulling his phone out of his pocket, horrified when he sees the missed call from Matthew.

He dials his number, heading away from the building toward the car parked nearby. The parking lot is almost empty by now, and it's starting to rain, and it's getting harder with every

passing minute.

Matthew picks up the phone almost immediately, clearly holding it right in his hand, alarmed at the lack of an answer for a monstrous five minutes that seemed like an eternity. "Will!" his voice is a mixture of relief and dismay, and he waits anxiously for an answer for a long two seconds.

Graham exhales; nothing seems to be wrong with the young man, he was just worried about him. "Hi, Matthew. I'm fine, it's just that the phone was on silent. Are you okay?" he asks, taking his car keys out of the pocket.

"I... am…" Brown is somewhat awkwardly silent, biting his lip, contemplating whether to tell him about the letter. "Just worried. Are you going home soon?"

Will sighs. "Yeah. Just gonna call Alana and Jack. I have a hunch about what Hannibal and his Tarologist might be up to," he says and doesn't hold back, chuckling nervously. "No, that's just hilarious. *Of course* he's using one of the orderlies! He has access to them, they show up regularly in his field of direct influence, and of course it's just so damn in his style - the repetition of events, the cyclicality. There's a beauty to it, he thinks. I sent an orderly to kill him, he sent an orderly to kill me - or you, more likely. His fan destroys mine. And of course injections! Of course! Paris died from a poisoned arrow!" he lets out an almost hysterical, painful laugh, stopping by the car, leaning against the roof with his hand, squinting and taking slow breaths in an attempt to calm himself. "Be home, get a gun," he says.

"Okay," Matthew says excitedly, rushing straight into the bedroom. "Do you have a gun with you?"

"How many guns do you think I have?" Will asks sarcastically.

"Not enough, it seems," Brown snorts, picking up his gun and checking the amount of bullets in it. He sighs. "Will, be careful. I... I just got a letter from Hannibal..."

"A letter? For you?" he asks a little confused. "Fuck. Why is he writing to you? Did you burn the letter?"

"I... no, I didn't..."

"Matthew..."

"I know, I know!" he rubs his face with the palm of his hand, rushing to the window to look out into the yard somewhat anxiously. "I told you because I think he sent him not for me, but for you. Please, be very careful, Will," he pleads, squinting, trying to calm the wave of anxiety that makes him shiver, as if after one of his nightmares. For the most part, he doesn't care about his life or his own suffering; but he would rather give himself to a pack of vultures to be tortured by them than let someone hurt his lover even a little bit. The very thought of Graham's death feels like a noose around his neck, needles under his fingernails, fire consuming every part of his body. He exhales slowly, coaxing himself to calm down, to keep his head cool, to not give in to an irrational panic. "I love you," he says, feeling he must say

it. "I love you," is his new prayer. God, let them take me, not him; God, take away from him the hellhounds who hunger for fresh flesh; God, anyone but him. I love him.

Graham sighs, closing his eyes as he continues to lean against the car, and a faint smile touches his lips at the echo of the man's voice. "I'll be fine. I'll be home soon," he says, opening the door. "And Matthew," he puts into those words all the warmth his now so anxious heart is capable of, "I love-"

The phrase cuts off mid-sentence, and Brown hears a strange sound, quickly realizing that the phone has fallen from Will's hands, and the man himself has suddenly made a faint muffled sound, like a groan of pain. "Will?" he called out, feeling the gap between his heart beating before a fit of tachycardia and panic. "Will!" he calls out, hearing instead of an answer the sound of a thump and someone's footsteps, after which the call stops as the phone is kicked toward the nearest wall.

Brown listens to the quick beeps of the call ending, and they remind him of the last ticking of a bomb before it explodes.

"Will..."

Chapter 20

Matthew doesn't allow himself to hesitate, not even thinks about how many speeding tickets he'll get later. He just makes his way to the hospital as quickly as possible, rushing in to Alana so she'll give him a chance to talk to Hannibal right now. In response to the frown on her face, he quickly explains that it's for Will's sake, that the man may be in danger, and that Lecter knows exactly where he is; his fiery speech sounds convincing enough for Dr. Bloom to begin to look tense and attacked by anxious thoughts - as if she can hear the sound of Gabriel's horn heralding the coming doomsday. She presses her lips into a thin line as she gets up from her chair and leads Matthew to the right section of the hospital.

"Tarologist usually kills his victims right away, they are found at the crime scene itself. What are you hoping for?" the woman asks, typing in the passcode to the right door.

"Hannibal is a complete asshole, but he wants to kill me, not Will," Brown notes caustically, biting his lips nervously and feeling like an old mattress spring ready to dig into somebody's back. "Let's hope the Magician gets it."

"The Magician?"

Matthew sighs nervously, following her down the empty hallway. "That's what Will called him," he says. "Alana, it's one of the orderlies. Will told me that the last time we talked on the phone, right before he was-" he falls silent, biting his lips.

"No, I check them every month, and even more often since that Tarologist showed up," Bloom replies abruptly. "I take every precaution precisely to make sure he can't collude with anyone."

"Well, obviously, you haven't done enough," Matthew notes. Alana purses her lips, exchanging gloomy glances with him.

She walks to the last door separating the world from Hannibal Lecter and stops, glaring at Brown. "I suppose I don't need to waste time explaining the rules."

"Yeah, I know the drill, Dr. Bloom. I've played all sorts of roles in this theatre of absurd," Matthew replies in a tense, steely voice, casting a dark look at her; it's as if he has no trace of his former nonchalance or mirth, his whole being now is the steadfast determination of a saint going to his execution for the sake of his beloved and his faith in him.

"Don't let him consume you," the woman instructs, opening the final hurdle between them. Brown feels as if he is about to sink to the bottom of the ocean, and takes a slow, quiet, deep breath before taking a step and walking inside; when Dr. Bloom tries to follow him, he stops her with a determined and firm gesture, and she, with only a reproachful look at Hannibal, still agrees to leave.

Lecter sits quietly at his desk, pencil is in his hand, and he looks at his visitor from his seat with the mild curiosity with which a novice lepidopterist usually looks at a dried butterfly

through the prism of a microscope, pushing back its wings with his tweezers without much concern for damaging them.

Matthew approaches confidently. "Where is he?" he asks firmly, getting right to the point, though he knows in advance that Hannibal won't tell him anything that easily; no, he cares more about pathos than he does about his loved one. Brown wishes he could take out his gun now and shoot him in the face right through those slits in the glass.

"Hello, Matthew," Lecter says quietly. "What, it’s time already?"

"For once in your life, don't make a show out of tragedy and just tell me where Will is, Hannibal," Matthew demands, stopping only when he gets close enough to the barrier separating them. He's not afraid of him. He doesn't flinch in front of him. He looks at him and sees a man who thinks too much of himself. Even though he is the Devil in his story, Brown has proven once already that he can make him bleed. This man is mortal. Unfortunately, so is Will.

Gods can die too.

"Curious. Will has been trying his best to avoid addressing me by my name lately in his conversations with me; saying he is the more comfortable the less personal we are," Hannibal remarks quietly. "You address me by my name, erasing one of the barriers that would allow you to perceive me as a stranger."

"Oh, this is personal, Hannibal," Matthew replies caustically. "But I don’t care about this now; I don't have time for it, as you clearly pointed out in your naughty letter. Where's Will?"

"Learning from your mistakes and avoiding pompous talk in emergency situations? Not bad, not bad at all," Lecter remarks, rising from his chair, walking quietly around the table. "Believe me, I know how much time we have. There's still plenty of it for us to talk."

"The last time we talked, you were bleeding and had a noose around your neck," Matthew notes. "And those are the only conditions in which I would want to discuss anything with you."

"The last time we talked, you were shot and arrested and had to spend several years behind bars," Hannibal parried. "I doubt you'd want to recreate those conditions as well."

Brown only wrinkles contemptuously. "Regrets. If I had been allowed to sneak a gun in here, I would have gladly shot you. It would save Will a lot of trouble. And not just him," he notes caustically. "What do you want to talk about? What is it you want me to say to finally tell me where this Tarologist has taken Will?"

"I'm only curious to see what you're really like."

"You want to soberly assess the threat?" Brown quipped, not holding back.

Hannibal chuckles lightly. "I wouldn't call this a threat. It's like being wary of a common bird. It may cause a little trouble, but nothing more than that. We are not equals on this battlefield.

Your love for Will is like a vulgar Valentine's Day card, glittering with pink stickers and sparkles, made by the hands of an inept sweaty teenager. My love for him is a heart made out of a human body."

"Maybe," Matthew says with a challenge and shrugs. "But he doesn't need a heart made out of a man. At this point in his life, he's more than happy to get cute Valentine's cards and notes on the fridge written in my sloppy, not at all calligraphic handwriting," he says, gradually getting into the mood. "Okay! Did he ever tell you he loves you? You don't have to answer. I know he didn't. He said those three cherished words to me, and he said them more than once. And it wasn't a lie - I know a lie when I see one, believe me. So you can tell me as much as you want that I'm a temporary infatuation, a side quest, a tool he uses just to spite you - it doesn't become true simply because you say it. The world does not revolve around you, Hannibal. Certainly not Will Graham's world. You are radiation. Harmful, bad for his health and his life. Your love for him is violence. It might have been fun at first, but you can't build any stability on that. Will is tired of you."

"Some things never change, Matthew. Will Graham is not what you think," Lecter remarks quietly. "He's a mirror. Right now he's only reflecting your emotions and feelings. It's not love. Whatever you call it, but it certainly isn't."

"So you wanna tell me that what you two have is love?"

Hannibal smiles slightly smugly in response.

This makes Matthew very angry, and he keeps hearing the ticking of the clock as if in the background inside his cranium. "You seriously think *this* is love, humiliating what Will and I have? I give him peace and warmth. And you took his child from him!"

Lecter is a little surprised that this came up at all at any point between Will and Brown. He doesn't let it overtake him, though, remaining calm, his emotion betrayed only by a raised eyebrow. "I gave him this child. What I gave to him I can take back."

"And in what world would you call this love?" Matthew questions. "You hurt him and watch him bleed out beautifully as his eyes begin to sparkle with animal rage over your manipulations. You think you're entitled to it, that it's for his own good, that you're just giving him a chance to understand and accept himself, but it's violence! It's egocentric! You have seen in him a man who can understand you, and you have decided to do everything to weave your destinies with him into one, while cutting off all the other threads that dare even slightly touch his! You want to raise him to your level, that's what you want. I want to reach for him. To be changed, not to change him!"

"It is quite natural, for you are not equal."

"You don't know anything about us. We are hawks."

"Maybe. But hawks are that kind of bird - they are loyal to each other only as long as their partner is alive, no longer. They're not familiar with the concept of swan loyalty."

Matthew loses his patience. "God, you're seriously willing to risk Will's life just to have a dick measuring contest with me," he spits out, coming closer to the glass, resting his hand on it at the height of his shoulders, clenching it into a fist. "What do you want me to say, Hannibal? That Will and I can never have anything even remotely resembling what you have, that you're bonded, that you're soul mates, and I'm just a temporary option, one episode in a long line of your story? Sure, I can say it. Just let me save his goddamn life!"

"Fascinating devotion and self-sacrifice. You really are a Hanged Man. As ironic as it sounds," Hannibal smiles slightly with a hint of satisfaction. "A faithful servant. Maybe if you hadn't overstepped the bounds of decency, I would have liked you more alive than dead. But I've always had a weakness for an eye for an eye, for good old-fashioned justice. What's that saying? As above, so below? What was in the past is coming back now. The cast has slightly changed, but the setting and the story is about the same as it was years ago."

Matthew is angry, and because of this, it's only after a few long seconds of mutual silence that Lecter's words make sense to him. The expression of righteous rage melts on his face, replaced by a look of anxiety as he looks up at Hannibal.

"Tick-tock, Matthew," Lecter reminds him, tilting his head slightly to the side and smiling. "It's time for you to go on the stage."

Brown breathes deeply, the realization feels like a wave of cold running through his body in the freezing February wind. He presses his lips into a thin line, sparks of rage reappear in his eyes, and he strikes the glass one last time out of emotion, and a loud thud reverberates through the room. Abruptly turning around, Matthew walks away with a broad stride, feeling the piercing stare of the cannibal's taunting dark eyes on his back.

He walks down the hallway at a determined pace, barely reacting when Alana approaches him, asking if he found out anything. She has a phone in her hand, but she wasn't talking to the FBI, no - to her wife. Matthew sees tension and a slight shadow of fear in her eyes, and he realizes that the mother is worried that the Tarologist will come for her family. After all, Hannibal promised to deal personally only with her, not with Margot or their son.

She must have buried Will already, it seems.

He wants to answer her when he suddenly spots a familiar face on his way - Jimmy Price himself, waiting outside Dr. Bloom's office and standing up when he sees them, frowning somewhat bewildered, trying to figure out what's going on. Matthew immediately grabs his elbow without stopping, walking on toward the exit, not wanting to slow down at a time like this. He ignores the man's questions and his feeble unsure attempts to break free of his grip. "Hey, Jimmy. I'm in a bit of a hurry here, so be a friend and answer my questions without asking your own in return," he says. "What does the Hanged Man card mean?"

Price is still very confused and looks over his shoulder somewhat incomprehensibly at Alana, who is straining to look at Matthew while holding her phone to her chest. "Um... different stuff? But mostly it's about loyalty and self-sacrifice, or..."

"Of course," Brown wrinkles his nose, swearing under his breath. "Okay. One more question. Remind me again, how fast does this Tarologist’s poison work?"

"Well... it's different for everyone, it depends on body weight, medications taken, past drug experience..." Jimmy lists a little uncertainly. "On average, in a normal situation, it takes about five minutes. The first victim died quicker because she was rather petite, and the man lost consciousness due to an epileptic seizure. But experiments have shown that-"

"I get it, five minutes then," Matthew interrupts him. "Now another question. No, not a question, a request - no, a demand," he still stops at the door, looking at Jimmy. "Remember the pool I once tried to kill Hannibal in? Call your FBI guys and have them all go there to catch this fucking Tarologist before I kill him in an attempted self-defense," he says and opens the doors, ignoring the man's confused look, heading straight for the car.

“What?” is the last thing he hears from Jimmy and Alana.

When Will wakes up, he feels slightly dizzy, and there seems to be so little air around him that no matter how many deep breaths he takes, he still can't get enough of it. He smells chlorine and feels the cold tiles beneath him, and he doesn't manage to open his eyes on the first try. Along the way, he realizes that he can't move much because he's tied to a chair. He twitches his arms and hears the familiar clang from the chain of handcuffs, the bracelets gripping his wrists almost painfully. He swallows, trying to focus on his vision, and flinches slightly when he sees a tall man with long black hair and emerald eyes staring directly at him. In his face Graham unmistakably immediately notices a slight curiosity, mistrust, caution. It's as if he's watching a wild animal through the bars of a cage in a zoo, about to extend his pale hand to its mouth.

Will swallows, feeling the medicinal taste on his tongue, and sighs heavily, raising his head slightly to face the Tarologist. "Well, I guess it would be reasonable to ask why I'm still alive. You usually do things differently, you know," his voice sounds hoarse, and his ears are still ringing unpleasantly, and he wrinkles in a slight pain.

The man remains standing still, his arms slumped along his body, some of his fingers wrapped in pieces of bandage and taped with band-aids, as if he were a very sloppy man who had recently started doing manual labor. From his coat pocket sticks out something like a white medical kit, a small one, can only keep the essentials. Will knows what's in there.

"The Hermit must die alone," the Tarologist replies, and then takes a step forward and leans his head slightly to the side, looking down at Graham. "Otherwise the picture won't be perfect. The Hanged Man must die first," he smiles softly with just his lips, his eyes still the same dead swamp. "Don't worry, I have two doses with me this time."

He speaks in images. Perceives the world through images. A man who weaves himself a defense of metaphors like some kind of armor. Will runs desperately through the corridors of his memory palace, trying to find something to latch on to, just to play for time. Finally, as if right in his hands, an open book falls with the required lines printed across the page. "Who your mother was?" he asks, and manages to notice how the man seems to recoil slightly at the mention of a relative. Will decides not to stop there. "What card do you see in her now, so many years after you helped her to die?"

Alex might chuckle now. Graham and Lecter are sides of the same coin. Their minds are so closely woven together that they think in the same direction, like spouses who have lived side by side for decades. Wit turns around and reaches for a nearby chair, pulling it closer, the legs squeaking nastily on the tile. He sits down across from Will and sighs, taking a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Just as silently, he pulls out one and smokes, offering another for Graham, but he refuses, shaking his head and saying in a low voice, "No, thank you." Alex hums and exhales a gray smoke.

"The Empress," he replies after a while. His voice sounds like its good for reciting poetry while standing on a table in some bar. He has a slight accent that reminds Graham of Hannibal; something Eastern European. "Feminine, sensual, creative. And she just enormously loved nature. Especially when she became ill. The whole house was potted with flowers."

"And the father?" Will asks.

Alex chuckles. "Where I come from, the fathers in the family are some kind of a unicorn, Mr. Graham."

Will nods, looking away. The puzzle is very easy to put together. He sighs. "Your Emperor is just using you. You won't get a chance to replace him on the throne. You will be arrested and put behind bars. And I doubt Dr. Bloom will give you the same absurdly good conditions your Emperor's bedchamber currently is," he wrinkles his nose, looking at Wit again. The man answers him nothing, continuing to smoke with an expression of calm indifference on his face. "He sent you to your certain death. He doesn't want me dead, certainly not at the hands of some court jester."

"I don't care what he wants," Alex sighs, flicking the ashes sideways right onto the tiles. "If he thinks I'm his errand boy, he's dead wrong about that. All I do is carry out my mission."

"Wow. Sounds like a teenage rebellion," Will remarks, leaning back in his chair. His hands are handcuffed and there's a homicidal orderly beside him. Brings back nostalgic memories.

"If I manage to avoid capture tonight, I'll kill the Emperor," Wit declares, and Graham even raises his eyebrows slightly in surprise as he turns his gaze to him. "He's changed. Because of you. Became a pathetic parody of himself exactly the moment he voluntarily surrendered to the FBI because of you. He tries to weave intrigue from a place where he has locked himself in, manipulates those around him, scribbles letters, practices drawing like an exile in banishment. No, he's not the Emperor he used to be - he's the Naked King, that's who he is. That's what you've turned him into."

"Why are you obeying his orders then?" Will asks. "And with Chilton, and now."

"Chilton's stupidity is objective and not directly related to Dr. Lecter. He didn't give me orders to kill him, I volunteered," Alex states in a slightly irritated, arrogant tone.

"You couldn't get past such stupidity, of course," Graham smiles wryly, looking up at Wit, who has risen from his seat. The man throws the butt to the floor and puts it out with his boot.

"But what's the grand design in killing Matthew and me? Just for the sake of a pretty picture? That sounds more like the Ripper than the Magician."

Alex, with a sigh, takes a deck of cards out of his other pocket, opening it and shuffling it, and then deftly pulls out three cards at a time and throws them on the floor in front of Will. The man lowers his gaze and sees the Hanged Man, the Lovers, and the upside-down Hermit. Graham looks at this trick, then looks up at the man. Wit has a peaceful smile on his face. "The cards have told me. I listen to the cards," he walks over and squats down beside the fallen cards and picks up the first one, showing Will the image of the Hanged Man. "Sacrificial, loyal, willing to do anything for you. He's like the Knight of Wands, a charming and fearless lover, impulsive and therefore able to easily slip and fall, like a Fool, into the dark abyss," the Tarologist says and tucks the card into the breast pocket of his robe, then takes the next card, looking at Graham again. "Lovers. A connection that, at a certain point, expands the boundaries of both, a kind of paradise in a hovel. That's one of the interpretations. Interested in the other? It's a card of choice, Will. A dilemma to consider carefully, for which everything must be weighed properly," he tosses the card carelessly aside and deftly grabs the last one from the floor afterwards. "Like a man lost in his own dreams, the Hermit risks being trapped within himself, in a world of his own, far away from everyone. His unconscious is filled with images that he is incapable of understanding and accepting. He is a victim of his own thoughts and his own loneliness." Wit puts the card aside with the explicit intention of returning to it later.

"And Lara Johnson?" Will asks, and Alex tenses a little, averting his gaze; a somber shadow falls over his face. "Tower wasn't about her personality, but about the situation. You didn't show her."

The man is silent. Graham sighs and leans back in his chair, turning his gaze to the ceiling. He's safe until Matthew comes, and then things could go down a bad path; and Matthew will come. He's too smart and too desperate, and he'll come running to save him. Will knows this and he can only silently hope that fortune will be on Brown's side tonight.

"The Star," Alex says suddenly, and Graham lowers his gaze to him. "She was..."

He is interrupted by a distant sound, like something falling, and Will guesses - some kind of trap, something standing by the door so it couldn't be opened without dropping things and causing quite a stir. Matthew is here. They know he's here, and he knows they know. Will vividly imagines the man swearing under his breath and gripping the gun tighter, making his way further down the building's familiar darkly shrouded corridors with the wariness of a wildcat.

Wit gets to his feet, looking toward the entrance of the room, and then picks up the deck again and pulls out a new card, smiling as he looks at it, and then shows "Wheel of Fortune" to Graham. He tosses the card under his feet, looking down at Will. "It'll be all over soon, Will. Think of it as my help. I will free you from all the pain that has grown moss inside your mind. You will both pass away in your sleep, painlessly, and on the same day. Isn't that romantic?"

It's hard to tell from him whether he's mocking or speaking sincerely. Will thinks about doing right now what he's already done once in his imagination, twisting his wrist and getting rid of

the handcuffs to attack, but a melee with this man would not be wise. And the handcuffs are too tight for his wrists. Things might not work. He glances at the bunch of keys lying next to the deck of cards he'd left behind and considers how he could have gotten to them once Wit had left, but the man prudently takes them with him, giving Will one last smile. Looking at his back, Graham feels panic rising to his heart at such an inopportune time.

He feels crucified.

Chapter 21

Matthew swears quietly and presses his lips together as he hits the crafted construction with the door and it rattles to the floor, betraying his presence. He clutches the gun tighter in his hand as he begins to walk cautiously forward, looking around, trying to spot any tiny detail that might point him in the right direction, toward his Will. He can almost hear his own heart beating, as if to make the situation even more intense, and the only thought in his head is to find Will, to run to him, to help him, to save him. He won't even let the image of the already dead Graham appear in his head, driving it away from him like a swarm of wasps. He keeps convincing himself that he still has a chance.

The man swallows, cautiously making his way to the very room where he almost executed Hannibal a few years ago. If he had succeeded then, if only he had been able to kick the bucket out from under his feet earlier, things might have turned out very differently. He and Will would have been able to be together in peace without feeling the Baltimore-style god of death at their backs. Missed opportunities, unfulfilled scenarios, were what had poisoned his life both in the hospital and now. Especially now. These thoughts make him want to peel off his skin and jump into a vat of acid.

The facility is empty, and Brown heads as quietly as he can toward the pool itself, taking his way through the ajar locker room. It's dark, and he sticks to the wall, quickly checking the corners before walking forward, feeling like a kind of agent on a mission. Matthew thinks fleetingly about how soon the FBI will get here - probably within ten minutes, maybe sooner if Price gets through to Jack fast enough and they won't have to waste time. It was raining and it was rush hour, and the city was full of traffic if you don't know the right roads; Matthew had to leave his car a block away and get to the building in the pouring rain, with his gun hidden in his backpack, which he'd dropped by the entrance before he went in. He's soaked through, his short hair a little curled and his white T-shirt sticking to his body, but he doesn't care about any of that right now.

Right now he's trying to control his breathing and not to panic, not to start fooling around in pursuit of prey - or, rather, in a fight with the enemy. As he crosses the threshold of the locker room, he looks around, then casts his gaze into the place itself, concentrating on the water for a few moments - memories felt like droplets running down his body - as he suddenly feels someone's presence behind him, as if a slight whiff of wind betrays the presence of a stranger quite close. Matthew turns around sharply, successfully knocking the syringe out of the orderly's hand, and it flies straight into the pool, hitting the water and rapidly sinking to the bottom. Brown is distracted for a moment, realizing **what** he has just avoided, and the man takes advantage of this, hitting him and forcing him to let go of the gun; his enemy pushes it with his foot, and it goes straight after the poisoned syringe over the slippery floor.

Matthew wants to curse, but instead focuses his attention on his opponent, and a spark of recognition flashes in his eyes. "I remember you!" he says, looking into memorable green eyes; this orderly - what's his name? Seems to be A. Wit. A - must have been Alex; what was his name there? Oh, that's right, Alexander! - he had seen him many times when he himself was in the BSHCI, a silent and gloomy fellow, reading books during his breaks and often

giving them to patients; he had given him a book once, too. It seemed to be a translation of some writer. Griboedov? Of, yes - "Woe from Wit"! Comedy! Something in verse, something funny and in a way about love and the non-acceptance of man by society, the non-acceptance of society by man. These thoughts and memories flicker quickly through his mind, but he's not allowed to focus on anything for too long; Wit thrusts forward sharply, as if wanting to knock him to the ground like a violent patient, but strength is clearly not on his side, and Matthew pushes him himself, causing the man to slam his back against the nearest wall. "Okay, I take it we're not gonna have a friendly chat here," he says, shortening the distance between them and grabbing him by the robe, looking him in the face, now appearing not confused, but menacing and determined. "Where's Will? Is he alive?"

Alex smirks, looking at him with his bright eyes. "You really are what I thought you were," he purrs. "You've got a noose around your neck and you keep reaching forward," a smug smile appears on his face.

Matthew has no intention of tolerating any of this. Squeezing the fabric harder with his fingers, he turns around and throws the man to the floor, right beside the pool, dropping down beside him and grabbing his hair, lowering his head to the surface of the water, submerging him there for five seconds. As he yanks his head up, the man begins greedily gulping air and laughing through the pain in his lungs.

"What zeal! What eagerness! Oh, love, love, love - that's what poets write about, right?" he grins. "I wonder how long it will last! "Absence - that common cure of love", isn't it, Mr. Brown? Lord Byron was right!" Alex laughs, and Matthew's heart clenches - absence? Is Will already dead? Anxiety pours from his eyes, giving away his confusion and grief and disbelief, and Wit tries to take advantage of it, hitting him as hard as he can, right in the side, and Brown, as if waking up, punches him in the face, adding scarlet to his pale, skinny features. Rage and despair fill his entire being, and all he can do is attack, like a hawk flying straight ahead, oblivious to branches and tree trunks in its path.

He feels no pain as he strikes blow after blow, and he feels no pity or compassion as he hears the final cry of pain and sees the glazed look in the man’s eyes as his head hits the floor once again. Matthew feels only a slight tingling sensation in his fingers, and his ears feel like they're filled with absorbent cotton, and he hears nothing but the ringing inside his skull. He stops, breathing heavily, and the world gradually comes back, as if a strange veil had fallen from him or a heavy haze of mist had dissolved from his surroundings. The world regains its tangibility. Smells, colors, sounds. The corpse in front of him stares lifelessly away; Brown didn't even notice he'd killed the man.

He doesn't feel the need to think about it. All that rings inside, all that makes his heart clench anxiously and his lungs burn with heaviness is Will, Will, Will. Images of his dead lover flash before his eyes, and he feels himself being turned inside out by fear and grief as he tries to push them away, as he tries to concentrate on the desperate hope that his lover is still alive, that he can be helped, that the lethal injection hasn't yet been pumped under his skin. He thinks, albeit with naive hope, that if Graham is still alive, he will definitely propose to him, tonight - and he doesn't care that he doesn't have a ring. He'd never felt anything like that about any living being, Will had turned his life upside down and awakened feelings in him that he'd never known existed, that he'd considered a myth, a fairy tale for children.

No, he couldn't be dead, that would be unfair, unfair, unfair... how could a mere mortal outlive his god? What's the point if he immediately follows, unable to endure such a devastating loss? A second, a minute, a day later - but he will do it, he can't, he can't be alone again, alone, without the only one by his side who could understand him, who saw him, alone, he alone...

"Matthew!" a familiar voice sounds from somewhere behind the wall, and the man throws his head up, as if addressing the sky itself.

"Will...?" he says quietly, disbelieving. "Will!" he calls out louder, immediately springing to his feet, still looking up in an attempt to find where the sound was coming from.

"I'm here!" a short pause. "I'm fine!" Brown hears, and a smile spreads across his face momentarily; he looks like the happiest man in the whole world, like a child delighted to see the first fireworks of his life. A slight laugh of relief escapes his lips, and he lowers his head to look at the defeated enemy, to give him his gloating grin, as suddenly the smile on his face melts away like wax under the rush of fire.

His lips are slightly ajar and his breathing slows. The air around him seems to become heavier, filling with blood and electricity, mixing with the nasty smell of medicine and chlorine.

Matthew's gaze is fixed on the syringe sticking out of his body, and an absurd thought flashes through his head like a tumbleweed across the desert: ah, so *this* is what that feeling was…

He grips the syringe with a trembling hand and pulls it out of his body, raising it to eye level, just to make sure - yes, it is what it is; and there is nothing left inside, everything - inside him, spreading through his blood, penetrating his body cells, engaged in a senseless unequal struggle with his weak white blood cells, striving to reach his brain, causing it to shut down smoothly. "Oh, this is bad," he utters softly as he exhales, and his face twists for a few moments in a painful expression of sorrow, "it’s bad, so bad..."

His gaze drifts toward the pool, where the first syringe lies at the bottom next to his gun. He has miraculously escaped his death only to take over Will's. The Hanged Man who sacrificed himself; Paris, pierced by a poisoned arrow; Pyramus, deceived by the bloody maw of the lioness, believed in his lover's death and foolishly threw himself on the sword.

The hand with the syringe lets go and it falls to the floor beside the posthumously smirking magician.

"Matthew!" Will calls out to him, and only then does Matthew regain consciousness, blinking several times, feeling the hot tears accumulate in the corners of his eyes. He realizes that time is ticking away faster and faster, slipping small grains of sand from his fingers onto the damp pool tile, and that he has no right to waste another minute. With a quick movement, he wipes tears from his eyes with the back of his palm and drops his gaze again to the keychain lying next to the syringe.

He picks it up quickly and, feeling some form of derealization, not quite aware of what is happening, walks quickly toward the corridor where his lover's voice was coming from;

around a new corner is the right door, and he speeds up, eager to see Will, eager to be there in time. And the mere sight of him makes Brown's face display a smile, albeit a timid but genuine one, and he gets beside him as quickly as he can, unlocking his handcuffs with trembling hands and immediately tossing the keychain aside, embracing the man in an emotional rush as soon as he gets to his feet.

"God, Matt, you're going to crush me," he jokes awkwardly, stroking him soothingly on the back, touched by such committed emotionality. "I'm fine, he hasn't done anything to me. Well, except for making me spend some time unconscious."

Brown smiles, squinting, squeezing him even tighter in his arms before letting go, only to wrap his palms around his face in the next moment and kiss Will without saying a word to him. The man raises his eyebrows slightly in surprise in response to the kiss, but after a few moments he forces his lover to pull away, pushing him insistently from himself.

He looks anxiously at Matthew, trying to guess what's going on in his head, in his bright eyes, in which the shadow of tears is visible. "You... killed him, didn't you? You think you're going to get in trouble? Matthew, it's…"

Brown laughs - genuinely, though with a touch of bitterness. He licks his lips, looking him in the eye, and shakes his head. "I don't think there'll be any trouble with that," he says and sighs, tilting his head forward, resting his forehead on the man's and placing a hand on the back of his neck. "Will..." he swallows, "something bad is about to happen to me," Matthew says and pulls back slightly, looking into Graham's eyes, watching not without pain in his heart as the features of his beloved face gradually darken with realization. An emotion that is hard to name; something akin to grief for grief yet to come, desperate denial, all five stages of living grief in the blink of an eye.

Will opens his mouth as if to say something, but does not have enough time; Brown, still tense out of pain, feels his legs shake, and almost falls, grabbing Graham's shoulders at the last moment. The man reflexively helps him hold on, but he's still weak from the drug Alex poisoned him with, so the debility overcomes him, and they settle on the floor, next to the scattered cards from the half-empty Magician's deck.

Brown doesn't know if it's his imagination, but he feels as if he can feel the deadly poison spreading through his body, gradually killing him; he can barely feel his legs, and the weakness makes him laugh nervously and cause a smile that looks more like a wound. He licks his dry lips, finding Will with an unfocused gaze, feeling his hand support his head, keeping it from hitting the cold tiles.

"Hey," he says and swallows again, feeling the medical taste in his mouth; his voice is a little more husky than usual. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Graham," his lips quiver slightly, as does his whole pale body. Will shakes his head as if he can't believe it, can't feel what's happening; one of his palms rests on Matthew's still heaving chest, and he feels his heartbeat, not wanting to realize that what's happening is not another of his insane nightmares, not a wild imagination, but a monstrous reality. "I'm still the happiest man in the world."

"You... stop..." Will asks in a weak, trembling voice, feeling the impending hysteria in his body from the realization of the inevitable loss that is about to happen. "I love you, don't you

dare do this," he feels the tears on his face and, though he sees the same on Matthew's, knows that this time it is not empathy; it is his pain, his suffering, his grief. It's worse and more painful than parting with his own limb; it's not his arm being cut off, it's a piece of his soul being torn away alive. That's why his chest hurts so much, why there's so little air around him, why his whole being is so tense. "I love you," the whisper is very quiet, but Graham knows Matthew can hear him. He always hears him. He says it, even though he wants to be silent, because his voice now sounds pathetic, it's trembling. But he cannot keep silent, because it will be much more painful for him afterwards to realize that he could have said it to him and didn't, could have given his faithful admirer the sweet taste of happiness on his tongue before he was gone and didn't. "I love..." he tries.

Brown smiles and spends the last of his energy bringing his hand to his lips, pointing his fingers at them, and Graham feels a heavy weight in his chest as he sees this and the way the man's eyes sparkle with love. He leans in without saying anything, silently complying with the mute request, covering his lips with one last, bitterest farewell kiss, and his tears fall onto Matthew's face, mingling with his own and rolling to the floor as their lips touch in a desperate attempt to clasp each other's souls, unable to let go, wanting to stay right here, right now, together, in this very moment forever.

Will doesn't stop the kiss until he can't feel the beat of his heart under his palm, and even then he freezes, touching his still warm lips, squinting in pain; as if his own heart had been ripped from his chest the moment Matthew's heart stopped.

He forces himself to pull away, staring into the features of his face, his covered eyes, his lips parted in utter devastating silence. It feels deceptive, as if he's only asleep and about to wake up, beginning to smile and entertain him with his endless chatter, warming him with his hot and warm stares better than any July sun. The unbeating heart under his palm shatters this illusion with the callousness of a cruel god.

Will feels empty.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He stands knee-deep in the river, casting his rod once more, listening to the murmuring water and beginning to peer at the flickering float on its surface. It's almost noon, and the sun is warming especially hard today, and Will grudgingly admits that he'll soon have to finish fishing and return home to his routine, his faulty boat engines and his beloved pack.

The man sighs softly as he looks back toward the shore, where, in the bright sun, Matthew is lying on a plaid blanket, holding a book from his home library. Will was willing to bet that Brown had already read it cover to cover three times, and, well, deep down, he understood Matt's anxious desire to read the already familiar story over and over again. It gives a sense of predictability, of stability, of peace. Will does that, too - returns to familiar pages to run through the lines at least once more, promising himself each time that it is the last one, and breaking that promise each time without much regret or guilt.

Matthew is such a page in the book of his life. The young man looks up from the book in his hands, catching Will's gaze and smiling warmly at him, sparking with that sincere love that has never left his body, even at the very moment of his death. Will smiles weakly back, dropping his eyes to the water, pensive, feeling heaviness in his chest area, as if weights had been tied to the arteries surrounding his heart and his throat had been clenched with a rope.

The Hermit. All alone. Trapped in his imagination, addicted to images like a drug addict to a heroin. He gathers his things and in a painful silence - how could it ever seem comfortable to him? - heads toward home, where he is greeted by dogs and the realization that they are all that he has now. No, not even like this - they are all Hannibal has allowed him to keep in his life. He wonders if Lecter will send an assassin to him sooner or later just to hurt his dogs. In a way, though, he already has.

Matthew had never considered his resemblance to Will's dog to be anything derogatory; every time Graham joked about it, he looked like a happy puppy, and the man had an idea why. Brown knew that Will loved his dogs more than anything in the world. He was flattered to share that love, and he couldn't help himself, more than once even comparing himself to a puppy or a fighting dog (depending on the situation and his mood). Memories of this now are all Graham has left.

When he opens the door, Mulberry runs outside, starting to circle around on the porch and barking, looking in the direction of the driveway to the house. Will sighs as he puts his things on the table and then returns to the dog, taking a seat next to her and rubbing her snow-white fur, which reminds him in a way of Matthew's white T-shirts and shirts. He smiles sadly, silently coaxing the dog to come back into the house, remembering with pain in his heart his own sobs that came over him when he returned home a month ago, alone, and as he walked across the threshold to see Mulberry quickly greet him and immediately try to peek behind his back to see her beloved owner there. He cuddled her afterward all night, while the other

dogs slept around him, at his feet, surrounding him with warmth, feeling sad themselves, as if they could feel the pressure of sorrow in the air.

Before and after, he did not cry. He was in no condition to do so. He didn't feel the strength for such emotions, or any emotions at all; it was as if before there had been a generator beside him, a solar panel that allowed him to function actively and emotionally, and now it was gone, and all he was left with was a feeling of utter derealization, where sleep was no different from wakefulness, hallucinations were mixed with reality, the past with the present. He looks in the mirror as if through himself, he cannot taste the fish he eats, he hardly feels the warmth of the sun's rays on his skin. The only thing that seems real to him is emptiness. The empty chair across the table as he eats in the kitchen. The empty seat next to him on the couch, the empty half of the bed. Songs don't seem as complete without a voice cheerfully singing along to them. His skin feels not real without the weight of someone else's touch on it, without Matthew’s hand on his chest when he sleeps and his fingers on his wrist when he's awake. Emptiness. The Hermit, drinking whiskey, looks at the second glass he pulled out of the cupboard just out of a mere habit.

Every time he walks past the bedroom door, he sees in it the slightly noticeable marks of the bullet holes Matthew fixed once while he was at work. Matthew had, in fact, been doing just that - patching the gaping holes in him with his care, his love, his words, sometimes even with his mere presence. Now that it's all gone, the old emptiness has only become more acute, more painful.

He tries to fill that void with his vivid imagination, but it hurts, like he's picking at an old wound that hasn't fully healed yet. He sits on the couch, looking at the book lying on the table nearby, and finally picks it up after all, putting the glass in its place. Opening the book at the page with the edge bent, he sighs, looking at the number of it. Matthew didn't have time to finish nearly half of this book. His story ended abruptly, unexpectedly, not giving him enough time to settle into this life. Death had taken him from Will's arms the moment he had not yet had time to taste the sweetness of their mutual love, the family warmth, the human passion. The ice cream he had time to lick and maybe take one bite of before it fell to the floor and turned into an inedible puddle.

He tries to use his fertile imagination to fool himself, but that's the problem with magicians - knowing the secret of the trick is hard to ignore reality and genuinely believe in their own lies. He sighs as he leans back on the couch and turns his head, looking at Matthew sitting next to him, hugging his knees. His eyes stare lovingly at him, giving him warmth, and, seeing it, Will can't help but smile, albeit with a fraction of the crunch of glass beneath his feet. He sighs and lowers his gaze to the lines, swallows, and then begins to read aloud from the moment Brown once stopped, though he himself hardly remembers what the book is about. He had read it, it seems, many years ago. At the time it didn't interest him - it seemed too simple and boring. Now he absorbs every word as if he were preparing to take the most important exam in his life. As he immerses himself in the lines, he feels the ghost-like warmth radiating from the smiling Matthew beside him.

Lying in bed in the morning, knowing that he will have to get up sooner or later for his dogs, he still can't do it right away. His gaze is fixed on the ceiling, but he himself is clearly not there; he remembers that night, remembers holding Brown in his arms as the FBI arrived in

the building minutes after his death. It felt unreal, like he was watching a movie, like he was a spectator. He remembers Jimmy trying to get through to him in a soft voice, bringing him back to reality; he remembers Brian quickly examining Matthew's body professionally, just as Price manages to gently get him to let go and get up off the floor. Remembers how death was pronounced, remembers even a shadow of regret in his friend's voice. Remembers Jack trying to tell him something, but can't remember exactly what the words were, only the image of him, the way he moved his lips and looked at him with his usual, intense, paternal gaze, resurfaces in his memory. He remembers Price opening the umbrella over him as they came out of the pool, and he remembers walking briskly forward along the sidewalk, away from the crime scene, remembers feeling the drops on his body, remembers his wet hair sticking to his forehead. Remembers Jimmy trying to catch up with him; he must have been worried. Will doesn't remember much of what happened next. Must have been the blood tests, the attempts to talk, the silent drive home. And then Mulberry, the tears, the soaking wet bed he lay in with his clothes on.

He gets out of bed, gets dressed, feeds the dogs and walks them, standing nearby while they entertain each other. Some of them have gotten used to Matthew running around with them, and they sense that something is wrong, glancing oddly at Will standing with his hands in his pockets. He sighs heavily, feeling sorry. He barely has the energy to do this, much less play with his beloved pack. Matthew would be upset.

He hears a rustling in the branches of the tree he's standing under and lifts his head, looking at the source of the sound. A bird with big wings is holding something in its teeth for its nest, which it is coiling here, and Will stares at it for a long time, not quite sure if it is a play on his imagination or just an absurd coincidence. Either way, there is hope in his soul that when he goes to walk his dogs here tomorrow, the nest will still be here, on these branches, waiting for him.

He isolates himself from everyone, trying to find peace in solitude, undisturbed by the anxious glances and inquiries from Alana or Jack. Only a couple of times has he responded to messages from Price, something like "how are you?" - "living," and nothing more. Occasionally he dared to add "thank you," really meaning it. But every time he picked up his phone, he was inevitably confronted with an internally tearing desire that he was unable to fight: the desire to open the gallery and revisit all the several hundred pictures in the album, in which photos and videos of dogs were followed by photos and videos of Matthew. Alive, smiling, laughing, singing, running, chatting - alive, alive, alive. A gallery of memories, confirmation that none of this was a dream, but a reality.

A way to realize the reality of the past and the absurd reality of the present. A present that has become ashes. What was left of Mathew's cremation (of course, that's what he'd stated in his will; Will wasn't even surprised) now stood in a neat urn on a shelf next to his books and music player. Graham doesn't know what he should do with it, wondering almost every night what Brown would have wanted, until one day the thought occurs to him of the very meadow in which Matthew had always found his peace. And yet he didn't yet have the heart to scatter the ashes and throw the urn away. He couldn't say goodbye. Not yet.

He spends this way his days, his weeks. His routine allows him to stay on his feet, but his mind keeps slipping away from him. Waking in the middle of the night from another

nightmare, he reflexively grabs his chest, listening to his aching heart pounding under his ribs. He wants to hear a supportive whisper beside him, wants to feel warm hands on him, hot breath, soft lips touching his neck, but he doesn't want to imagine all of this. He's tired of imagining.

After a couple of minutes spent in disgusting silence, he goes down to the first floor and writes a letter, which he sends early in the morning to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Having done so, he feels a sense of relief in his chest, as if he has finally been able to fill the huge gaping hole in the facade of his fortress, through which creeping beasts from the underworld have been trying to infiltrate his world this whole time.

Alana hands the envelope with the letter to Hannibal's cell in the evening, giving the prisoner a tense, stern look, then leaves him alone and walks out the door.

The letter begins abruptly and without the traditional greeting, it is full of crossed out words and whole sentences, the handwriting revealing how quickly it was written, in what heat, in what fever. It gives off the faint scent of whiskey, Will, and the acrid deodorant belonging to the deceased. Lecter's lips touch an uncertain, trembling smile as his dark gaze begins to slip over the lines of the letter lying before him, like his own epitaph.

He can almost imagine the harsh, irritated, in some places tired and exhausted voice of his beloved, planking the cracks of his mind from him with each new word, and some part of him for a while comes to the disappointing conclusion of another fateful mistake he has made, which he has no idea yet how - and whether? - he will ever be able to make up for.

The ink feels like poison spilled from the thin needle of a medical syringe.

His Helen was not bewitched. She was in love.

A common mistake.

I was terribly mistaken when I thought you had enough dignity and self-respect in yourself not to sink to such a pathetic act. If you thought he was nothing more than a minor quest - I found your letter for him and read it, Hannibal, I want you to be ashamed of yourself, but I know you won't be - then why did you try so hard to destroy him? Just to show your omnipotence, your whole level of influence over me and over my life?

I can understand why you took Abigail away from me for the first time - you wanted to save her from justice and preserve your life, your freedom; you sacrificed me for it, thinking it would be right for you and for myself - for my becoming. I can accept that.

I can understand why you took Beverly away from me - she was getting too close, and it didn't matter whether she was my friend or not, you had no choice, from a predator's point of view. It was a matter of freedom and life. I can accept that.

I can understand why you took Abigail away from me for the second time - you thought I had betrayed you, even though I hadn't. You gave me a chance the day before, a chance to drop

everything and come over to your side so we could all be together. You wanted to surprise me. I can accept that.

But you killed him because of such a pathetic, disgusting, petty feeling like jealousy, Hannibal. That's cheap. That's despicable. Rude. Ugly. You really just don't want me to have anyone in my life but you. You must feel favored by leaving me my dogs. Though perhaps it's just that part of you realizes that if you deprive me of them, I won't have any reason left to be here in this life any longer. Just as one starves and thirsts prisoners so that they betray the location of their army, so do you torment me with loneliness so that I will eventually come to you seeking acceptance, support, love. Maybe, under some circumstances, this could have eventually happened. Maybe.

Now it can't. The cup is broken and it can't gather itself back together, not even in my imagination. Chiyoh once told me that there are different means of influence other than violence, but violence is what I understand. Maybe she was right. I have a high pain threshold, I can tolerate and understand a lot of things, but even that has its limits, Hannibal. If you're so fixated on yourself, you may consider this to be my test for you, and you failed it. Now I know you don't want me to be happy. You want me to be with you. Whether in happiness or in suffering - that's already something secondary, isn't it?

You can't fix what's done with any formula, any tool, you can't fill the cracks of this cup with gold or your own feelings, whatever they may be. This door is not just closed now and from now on, Hannibal. I am not behind that door anymore.

I have made a decision. I'm selling the house. I've already found good families for most of my dogs, and I'm taking the ones I can with me. I'm going somewhere where Alana and Jack and you won't find me. Especially you. And if you ever manage to escape from the fortress in which you are kept and try to find me, know that you had better not do so. I know how to kill myself in a way so that you won't be able to eat me.

*Maybe you thought it would make me harden; maybe you were even right about this. "**They will get out of the fire who, after remaining a day with you, will not get out of their minds".** I don't think I could ever love anyone again. Love implies understanding. It's something I've only had with two people in my life - Matthew and you. Matthew is dead. You're dead, too. For me. You're the ghost I leave behind, Hannibal.*

I hope you're satisfied.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is the end, my dears. What happens next I leave to each one to decide for themselves, according to their own preferences and views on the story I have told. Thank you all for reading, for your feedback, for making my days so much better. As for my future involvement in this fandom - I already have a couple of ideas for Matthew and Will, but they'll be much smaller (I always need some rest time after such a big

work, heh), but they'll be there, soon! If you don't want to miss it, you can find me on tumblr, I'd love to see you there! It's maria-rayro https://www.tumblr.com/blog/maria-rayro

update! I think about making an alternative ending for this and curious if you into it guys, lemme know whether it's a good idea or not heh

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!